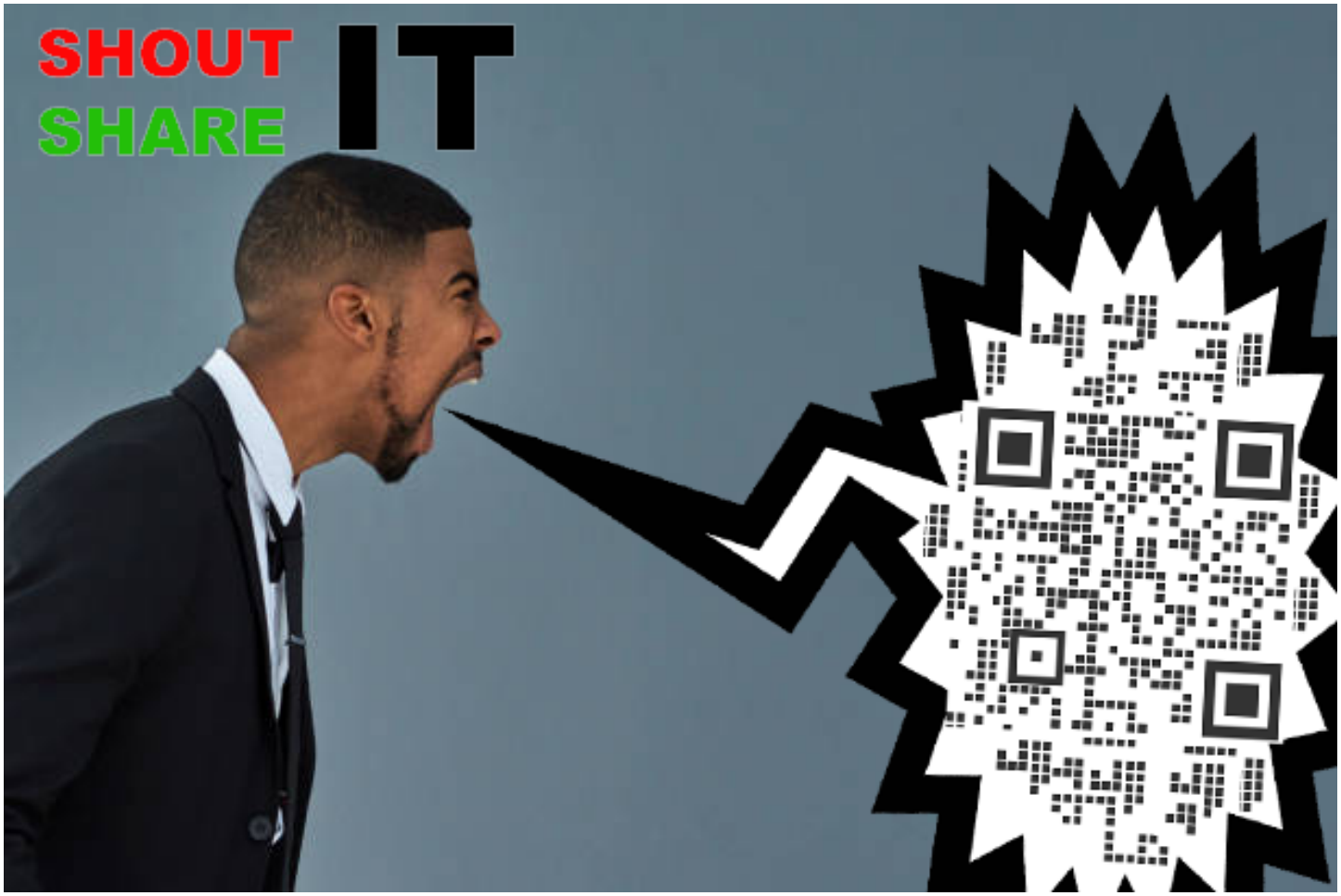
Indian Love Stories

Edited by Sudhir Kakar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INDIAN LOVE STORIES

Disgust can be as much part of erotic love as violence although the evocation of disgust has rarely reached the extremes portrayed in the fiction of Marquis de Sade. In de Sade's stories, erotic unions are routinely preceded, accompanied or followed by the smearing and eating of faeces, drinking of or bathing in urine, the licking of spit and vomit, a revelling in bodily odours—all in the service of heightening the excitement of erotic union. Violence, too, physical or mental, is part of many contemporary depictions of love.

(From the author's Introduction)

Sudhir Kakar is a distinguished writer and psychoanalyst based in Delhi. He has taught at several leading universities in India, Europe and the United States. His many honours include the Goethe Medal, the Boyer Prize of the American Anthropoligical Association and the Bhaba, Nehru and ICSSR National Fellowships as well as fellowships with the Institutes of Advanced Studies, Princeton and Berlin. His many books, translated into languages round the world, include *The Inner World; Shamans, Mystics and Doctors; Tales of Love, Sex and Danger; The Analyst and the Mystic; The Colours of Violence; Culture and Psyche; The Indian Psyche* and *The Ascetic of Desire.*

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INDIAN
LOVE STORIES

Edited by

SUDHIR KAKAR

LOTUS COLLECTION
ROLI BOOKS

Lotus Collection

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for their respective stories 1999

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First edition published in 1999

Reprinted in 2006
The Lotus Collection
An imprint of
Roli Books Pvt. Ltd.
M-75, G.K. II Market
New Delhi 110 048
Phones: ++91 (011) 2921 2271, 2921 2782
2921 0886, Fax: ++91 (011) 2921 7185
E-mail: roli@vsnl.com; Website: rolibooks.com
Also at
Bangalore, Mumbai, Varanasi, Jaipur and the Netherlands

ISBN: 81-7436-279-7

Typeset in Galliard by Roli Books Pvt. Ltd. and
printed at Sheel Print N Pack, Noida, U.P.

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Acknowledgements

Grateful acknowledgements are made to
the authors, translators and publications where
the stories were published:

"House Combustible": Ananda Publications, Calcutta.
"Stains": *Civil Lines*, New Delhi.
"Back to Square One": *PEN*, Bombay.
"A New Triangle": UBS, New Delhi.
"The Game of Chess": *Caravan*, New Delhi.
"The Bed of Arrows": The Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi.
"Housewife": *The Eye*, New Delhi.

Notes on Contributors

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Gauri Deshpande, born in Pune in 1942, took her doctorate from Pune University. Among her publications are *Between Berths, Lost Love* (poetry collections) and novels like *Chandrike Ga Sarike Ga* and *Nirgathi*. She has also edited an anthology of Indo-English poetry.

U.R. Anantha Murthy is a prolific playwright, novelist and short-story writer. He is best-known for his novels—*Bharathipurr, Awasthe, Samskara* and *Ghatashraddha*, the last two being made into award-winning films. The Jnanpith Award was recently bestowed on him. Dr. Anantha Murthy is currently the President of the Sahitya Akademi, Delhi.

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Ratanlal Shant is a professor of Hindi at the Kashmir University but prefers to write fiction in his mother tongue, Kashmiri. His published work includes a collection of short stories, *Achharvalan Peth Koh*. His stories have also featured in *Sheeraza, Sone Adab* and journals of the Sahitya Akademi.

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the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award in 1983. Mauzo is a regular columnist for the Konkani daily, *Sunaparant*. He has also written the screenplay and dialogues for a telefilm.

Kamala Das is known as the 'first feminine emotional revolutionary'. Born in 1934 in South Malabar, she was the first woman to write honestly about sexuality and love. Her short stories in Malayalam are published under the pen-name of Madhavi Kutti. She was awarded the Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award in 1969 and the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1981.

Gopinath Mohanty was one of the most prolific writers of Oriya literature. He published an incredible twenty-four novels, eight volumes of short stories and three plays. His works largely portray the life of tribals in Orissa, his native state. He was awarded the Jnanpith Award as well as the Padma Bhushan.

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Nirmal Verma took his Master's degree in History from St. Stephen's College. He spent nearly a decade in Prague translating Czech works into Hindi. A pioneer of the *Nai Kahani* movement in Hindi literature, he has several novels, short-story collections and national honours to his credit.

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Amrita Pritam is one of the earliest women writers of India. Born in Gujranwala, Pakistan, in 1919, her first collection of poems was published in 1935. She is the first woman to have received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1956 for her collection of poems, *Sunehere*. She was honoured with the Padma Shri in 1969, while in 1973, her *Kagaz Ke Kanvas* won her the Jnanpith Award.

Introduction

Of the many enduring fascinations of the love story, a vehicle for the vicarious satisfaction of our hidden desires and obscure longings, is the pleasure we take in its subversion of the conventions that govern the relationship between the sexes. At least, this is true of tales about young lovers who are believed to express the purest of romantic sentiments. In some of the classical love stories of the world—Romeo and Juliet, Layla and Majnun—the lovers express wishes which are utterly at odds with the accepted ideology of their time on the man-woman relationship. As I have shown elsewhere, the love of Romeo and Juliet is neither innocent or tender, as their cultural milieu would like to believe. It is imperious, violent and pervaded by the devouring hunger of the urge to merge. The teenage lovers are not virginal flowers or romantic innocents but, at heart, 'roaring tigers' and 'loving-jealous' jailers of each other. Similarly, in Layla and Majnun, a tale embedded in the Islamic culture of its time, with clear-cut stereotypes of male dominance and womanly deference, the

lovers overturn these expectations. Majnun is like an infant in his surrender to the woman whereas Layla is the bold and active partner in their doomed romance.

Reading contemporary love stories from all parts of India, I naturally wondered whether they too would be subversive of present-day social norms which define the male and female roles? Are there some particularly Indian themes in the fictional depiction of love in the last three decades of this century? I do not mean to imply that I read the stories with only questions in my mind. Like most readers of fiction, I read love stories, above all, for the pleasure they provide. If they must serve an edifying purpose, then I would prefer this to be a heightening of my aesthetic sensibility, a deepening of my sensate and metaphysical responsiveness. To varying degrees, the stories in this collection provide both pleasure and aesthetic satisfaction; they touch the senses and the heart.

Here, I cannot discuss the ways in which each love story delights the psyche which, after all, in its original Greek meaning, is our amorous soul. Such a discussion will dim the reader's own encounter with a story, rob it of its freshness. Explanation, the besetting sin of the intellectual, is too often used to foreclose experience. The task of this Introduction is how to discuss the stories without doing violence to the reader's personal response. What I intend to do, then, is give my impression of the whole collection without referring to individual stories, preserving thus both the uniqueness of each story and the reader's autonomy in discovering its pleasures.

First, a word on the process of selection. Literary experts were approached for their recommendations on 'two to three of your favourite contemporary love stories' in their mother tongue. Except for defining 'contemporary' as a chronological category—the last thirty to forty years—no other criteria were specified. Essentially, we were trusting

the judgement of our literary informants on what constitutes the 'best' in the literature of their language. If English translations did not exist, the stories were then translated. Ignorant of the tradition and trends of fiction in most Indian languages, my choice was based purely on the story's appeal to one reader—me. If another reader believes this or that story would have been a better representative of the genre in a particular language than the one I have selected, he or she will be perfectly justified in putting the blame on my ignorance and/or aesthetic shortcomings. The selected stories are, therefore, neither representative nor, I suspect, will be found by some readers to conform to their notion of what constitutes a 'love story.' The former is regrettable; the latter inevitable.

Traditional certainty that a literary depiction of love is marked by the presence of the *shringara rasa* is no longer available to us. Today, we cannot subscribe to Bharata's view in the *Natyashastra* that whatever in the ordinary world is bright, shining and beautiful is associated with love and that the erotic *rasa* is called *shringara* because it comes in a beautiful and charming dress. Alas, the contemporary world of love is rarely bright and shining; too often it is heavy and dark. The ancients could confidently proclaim that certain emotions such as laziness, violence and disgust do not belong to a depiction of love. The *rasa* of love today knows no such limits. Disgust can be as much part of erotic love as violence although the evocation of disgust has rarely reached the extremes portrayed in the fiction of Marquis de Sade. In de Sade's stories, erotic unions are routinely preceded, accompanied or followed by the smearing and eating of faeces, drinking of or bathing in urine, the licking of spit and vomit, a revelling in bodily odours—all in the service of heightening the excitement of erotic union. Violence, too, physical or mental, is part of many contemporary depictions of love.

Moreover, contemporary writers can no longer make the ancient distinction between love-in-union and love-in-separation. Union and separation are now more intricately related, the latter perhaps an inevitable consequence of the former. In modern fiction, the very birth of love often brings with it intimations of its end; the loss of love glimmers darkly through the fiery exultation of the moment in which it is found. Separation is to anticipate and reflect upon a predestined disappointment. It does not heighten love, as ancient poetics would have us believe, but only our despair as we confront our basic solitude. Union, too, is not 'shining, bright', joyous and ecstatic, but often depicted by today's writers as illusory and accompanied by a more or less conscious awareness that the beloved presents himself or herself as a body that can be penetrated and a consciousness which will remain separate, impenetrable. These are a few of the universal themes in the contemporary love story which also find an echo in our own selection.

Another striking impression I have of these stories is that the female protagonists are very often the more active, driving partners in the enterprise of love. Even when the woman suffers, the suffering is not in a passive, dull way which is often believed by traditionalists to be a woman's lot, but with a full awareness of the causes and course of the suffering—almost as if she is choosing what must be. The writers and the milieu of the stories are overwhelmingly urban middle class. What we encounter in many stories is thus the middle class 'dream of love'. The dream is of a love free of all social restrictions and internalised inhibitions. It is a dream of capturing love's freshness and spontaneity, of becoming one with the beloved while overwhelming all forces that would dampen desire and the urge to merge. The dream is of love unimpeded by the shackles of family obligations and duties

toward the old and all the other keepers of society's traditions. This nostalgia for the freshness of love's original vision is brought strikingly home in 'two stories by the conceit of a couple encountering each other after their marriage has ended in a divorce and the man–woman recover what had been lost in the mundane routine of marriage and its dream of safety.

The 'dream of love' is not muted, as in the middle class milieu of most stories, but presented right up front, in brilliant, loud colours, whenever the protagonist—a woman—belongs to the lower strata of society. A stranger to middle class morality and fears, such a heroine can be passionate and single minded in her pursuit of the vision love sends all of us. She can be amoral since the only obligation she recognises is to the truth of her love and the person of her beloved. Unlike her middle class sister, she does not have a conflict between what she unconsciously wishes and what she consciously wants. But, enough. Let me not hold the reader back from the feast that awaits him. A before-dinner speaker should be short; he should only seek to whet the appetite, not confuse his own offering with the main course. He would, however, be failing in his duty if he did not thank all who, through their recommendations, made this offering possible: B. Jayamohan, Sitakant Mahapatra, Ramachandra Sharma, B. Ranga Rao, Renu Bhan, K. Satchidanandan, Moitryee Mitra, Makarand Paranjpye, Nishikant Mirajkar, Arundhati Deosthale, Varsha Das, Manohar Shetty and Seema Sahni.

SUDHIR KAKAR

The Empty Chest

Indira Goswami

No one got up at this hour, not even the people who had come to live on the fringes of the cremation ground. A few bul-buls chattered in the hijol tree in front of Toradoi's shack. A flock of yellow-billed garu-bok had just flown past, heading for the horizon to the east of the Brahmaputra river. The stench of burnt human flesh stole across the cremation ground to mingle with the sweet scent of distant lemon-blossom.

Coming out of her shack, Toradoi saw that Haibor, the firewood-vendor from the crematorium, was standing under the hijol tree. Again, his spindly legs stuck out from beneath his black shorts. His white teeth gleamed like the chewed-up remains of sugarcane sticks.

Toradoi darted back into the house.

'What is left in this body to draw you back?' she muttered. 'Why don't you leave me in peace?'

How well she remembered his words. They fell on her ears, again, like hammer-blows.

'It will be a long time before the drunkard of yours comes out of jail. That is, if he comes out at all! After all, he has killed not one, but two people by ramming into them. It has been proved that he was drunk while driving. But I am here, don't worry! I will help, only keep the door open at night. This way at least your two kids won't starve to death!' Haibor had said.

Since then, lured by the prospect of seeing Toradoi's door open to him he had come everyday, even before daybreak, to stand under the hijol tree where the birds chirped and sipped honey from the flowers above his head.

When finally Toradoi went out again and looked around, Haibor was nowhere in sight. No, this firewood-vendor was not among those who furtively came to see the wooden chest she had scavenged from the cremation ground.

Toradoi peered around. Was someone still prying?

What kind of people were these, who like to sniff at each other like starved dogs? Shameless bastards! As if they would not strip you naked if they could. The other day the zamindar of Chakroad died—now doesn't the chowkidar Haladhar's hag of a wife sleep on the zamindar's bed made of uriam wood? Doesn't woodcutter Sukura's wife puff away at the hookah scrounged from this cremation ground? Some people had even salvaged gold rings from the charred remains of cremated bodies—but no, no one kept track of those things. No one had the morbid curiosity to go and see how Haladhar's spectre-like wife slept on the zamindar's bed. The belongings of the dead were scattered in the shacks and shanties in and around the crematorium. Various opulent objects leered from these incogruous settings. Yet all eyes were only on this black box of hers!

Toradoi returned to her shack. She could see her sleeping children. Anyone could count their ribs. Their trousers hung loose like the hides of goats strung up in a butcher's shop.

But there, next to them, lay the wooden chest! Its very existence was a source of strength to Toradoi.

She caressed the chest with her hands. The bakul flowers, beautifully engraved on its sides, seemed quite real. She pressed her cheek to these flowers. After that, as on other days, she wriggled into the huge chest and lay there, leaving its cavernous mouth open.

Strange! Strange indeed! Revelling in the incomparable pleasure she felt, she lay inert for a long time in this chest which had been flung aside after it had been divested of its dead passenger. When she had scrounged the chest from the cremation ground she had to take out some blood-stained pieces of ice from it. She had almost forgotten about that. Toradoi wept.

After sometime, a police jeep roared past her hut. Usually no vehicles other than police cars passed this way. Were the certificates pertaining to the handing over of the bodies of people killed by gun-shot, in order? Was it true, as the chowkidar's report would have it, that someone had come and burnt a bastard-child here without getting a 'handover' certificate? And what about the unregistered corpses? Such were the matters that drew the police to this area. Also, the flesh-trade of the prostitutes of Satgaon flourished here.

It seemed as if the higher the flames devouring the dead, the greater was the heat generated by the bodies of these prostitutes. Yes, there were so many things that the police had to attend to! So many matters that ensured a continual movement of police cars, that led to altercations between the police and members of the crematorium committee.

Toradoi woke up with a start at the sound of the police zonga.

Vermilion and flowers, meant for decorating the hair, lay scattered inside the chest. Strange! How had her very being become so inextricably entangled with this inanimate chest? She felt she was spending the night on the same bed with

the 'adored one'. This wooden chest bore the imprints of her personality: her hair-oil, vermilion. Last night she had again taken out her wedding blouse from the pile of tattered clothes, and put it on. It was the only article of her clothing which was still intact. Looking at her reflection in the mirror in the flickering light of a kerosene-lamp, she had combed her hair with frantic eagerness, as she had done ten years ago. She had not even felt the comb grate against the bones on her shoulder and neck. In those days she had hardly known of the existence of bones, buried under the abundance of pliant flesh. Now people said that she was one of the numerous living skeletons subsisting on the cremation ground.

Was anyone looking?

These days people peeped through crannies and gaps between doors and windows and walls. Her boys, now sleeping peacefully, had complained that people spied all the time.

'Shame, Shame! Sleeping in the box that carried the dead! Throw it away!' the voices seemed to say.

Toradoi snuggled into the chest. This experience was unique.

Suddenly, someone gave a massive kick to the door. Startled and flustered, Toradoi got up. Straining her ears, she heard the booming voice of her brother Someswar who worked in the police.

'Toradoi! Toradoi!'

As soon as Toradoi opened the door a man dressed in police uniform burst in. He was sturdily built, and with an imposing moustache. He wore a pair of huge, ungainly boots and carried a sizable stick.

'I haven't been able until now, to find the time to see how you are. Today my duty is in these parts. That woman from Satgaon has virtually set up shop here. It seems virtue is totally extinct. Only the other day Barua died and his two sons brought his body to the crematorium. While one was busy performing the last rites, the other gave everyone the

slip and was in that prostitute's room in a twinkle. Really, we have fallen on evil days!'

Suddenly he gave a gasp and retreated a few steps as if he'd seen a snake. Someswar gaped at the massive, elaborately decorated wooden chest. Going closer he tapped it with his stick. Then he walked around it. Finally, he knelt down by its side and taking out a handkerchief rubbed his eyes. The man who had rushed in like a storm a few moments before, now resembled a dejected and defeated soldier. He looked at Toradoi and asked in a broken voice, 'Is there some water in the house? Get me a glass of water, will you?'

He gulped down the water and then, said with his head downcast, 'What I heard is true, then. Saru Bopa's corpse travelled here in this chest. I accompanied the family part of the way from the airport. yes, this is that chest, alright.'

Casting a level and direct gaze at Toradoi, he said, 'Don't think I don't remember that you worked for them. Everyone knows what a great help you were when Saru Bopa'a father, the Thakur, was ill. Washing all those clothes stained with blood and pus. And Saru Bopa?' Someswar's voice grew heavy with emotion. 'He was so fond of you. Wasn't that the time when he was bent on marrying you? What a fracas there was in the Thakur's household over this! Then came the hasty transfer to Upper Assam—and then—the accident.'

Toradoi asked suddenly, 'What killed him?'

'A jeep. What a fine figure of a man he was! After removing the blood-stained pieces of ice I helped hoist his body onto the funeral pyre. With these two hands of mine. Fresh young blood on my hands...'

Looking at Toradoi standing like a statue, he could not complete his sentence. The big, black box with its open mouth was like some mysterious cave, separating and alienating the two of them.

Suddenly Someswar stood up and bellowed. There was a hint of the theatrical in his gesture. 'Toradoi, the days of

the sahebs marrying the daughters of labourers are gone. The grass now grows tall over the bones of Jenkins Saheb who married a labourer's girl. The big saheb's son, Saru Bopa, vowed he'd marry you. But could he do it? Did he succeed in taking you away from this hovel and giving you a place in a house with a tin-roof?'

A sigh that seemed to wrack her whole being, escaped Toradoi. 'Only because he couldn't marry me did he remain a bachelor. Twelve whole years have gone by—probably he would not have married at all.'

The huge constable glared at Toradoi. Beating a staccato note on the floor with his stout lathi he stood up, cursing Toradoi in a deep, rumbling voice. 'You are still as much of an idiot now as you were when you gave yourself completely to the Thakur's son. I work in the police, so I have heard everything and have come prepared.'

Toradoi looked helplessly at her brother. She had managed to salvage something precious from what had once been. Would her brother deprive her of even that?

By this time the sleeping children had got up. The three of them huddled together. They looked like phantoms from the cremation ground.

Someswar started rummaging in his pocket. The boys thought he was going to come up with something for them, just as the man did who always waited for their mother. After all, he was their uncle, though he had not once come to inquire after them when their father went to jail.

The three creatures continued to stare at Someswar. Toradoi could almost hear her own heartbeats.

Someswar dug out a bundle of letters from his pocket and flung them in Toradoi's face. 'Here, take these wedding cards of his,' he declared. 'Seeing the way things are going, I came prepared. Saru Bopa was not planning to stay an eternal bachelor because of you. His wedding had been fixed. Wedding cards had also been printed. Read them. Read them!

In fact he was on his way home to get married when the accident happened. Read them and pray for the peace of his soul.'

As he was about to rush out of the room, he suddenly noticed the boys clinging to their mother. He searched for some coins, but his mind was already on other things. Toradoi could hear him mutter, 'If I can catch that woman who peddles her body to mourners, or catch Haibor red-handed, I can make this trip worthwhile. That bastard Haibor passes off worn-eaten wood as sal wood.'

Taking out a fistful of coins, Someswar thrust them into the eager hands of the boys and left the way he had come. The moment their fingers closed around the coins, the half-starved urchins streaked off to the nearest shop.

Toradoi remained rooted to the spot near the pile of wedding cards. She reached out for the cards like someone who groped for the bones of the dead among the ashes of the crematorium.

Yes indeed, these were invitations to a wedding.

Toradoi did not venture out for many days.

Tormented by unbearable hunger, her two boys were driven to beg from the people who came to burn bodies. Someone had tied a gamoccha, which must have been worn by a person performing last rites, around the younger boy's head. The boys had managed to scavenge two empty liquor bottles from the cremation ground. These they had washed, filled with water from the well, near the statue of Yama astride a buffalo. This they drank to quench their hunger. The neighbours knew that Toradoi's hearth was cold.

The big black chest lay with its mouth yawning open, like the cavernous mouth of hell.

Under the hijol tree Haibor kept up his unceasing vigil.

One morning, while the gloom of the night still clung to the sky, Toradoi and her two sons could be seen dragging the wooden chest towards the cremation ground. Toradoi

put the box on the spot where the bastard-child had been controversially burnt and set fire to it.

The bul-buls on the hijol tree started chirping noisily. The sun rose above the Brahmaputra. Wreaths of violet and brown clouds clung to it, making it look like the pinched and pale face of a hapless prostitute, blushing at the thought of having to spend time with an unwanted stranger. The clouds seemed to lay bare the strange combination of helplessness and indomitable strength on this face.

The cinders of the burnt-out chest were scattered all over the place. In the morning sunshine they resembled the hide of a freshly butchered goat, spread out on the earth to dry.

Toradoi came out of her shack.

She wore no chadar.

The man who always stood under the hijol tree was not there.

Translated from the Assamese by
PRADIPTA BORGOHAIN

The House Combustible

Subodh Ghosh

That must be the ferry train just arrived at Rajpur Junction, out of breath, in the cold drizzling darkness. Probably it came from the direction of the Ganga. A little while ago a ferry steamer had disgorged a crowd of people who had crossed the river, and the sound of its receding whistle could still be heard as it headed back to the other bank.

The engine of the train, standing close to the platform, was letting out steam. The attendant of the first-class waiting room dusted the few pieces of furniture and the mirror with a towel, and the cleaning man removed, with a wide sweep of his large broom, what litter there was on the floor.

Although the ferry train was small, not all those who travelled on it were poor Santals. There were always a few passengers on it who travelled first-class; perhaps an owner of some sugar factory in Katihar or a manager of some tea garden returning from Darjeeling.

However, the two passengers who arrived tonight and headed for the first-class waiting room for shelter had no

connection with any sugar factory or tea-garden. The first to enter the waiting room was a Bengali woman. Her walk over the platform in the drizzle was brisk, and she was followed by a porter who was carrying her luggage on his head. She wore an overcoat of Kashmiri woollen material, small ear-rings and her hair was tied neatly in a Western-style bun.

The next person to enter the waiting room, a Bengali bhadralok, was also followed by a porter, carrying heaps of luggage. He wore a pair of spectacles and was dressed in the traditional Bengali style, with a shawl wrapped round him.

A man and a woman who had travelled on the same train now took shelter in a waiting room that is the only relation between them—if that can be called a relationship. One would perhaps wait here for a couple of hours while the other wait for an hour or so, to catch their respective trains.

Strangely, however, both were startled as soon as they looked at each other. Then they were unusually quiet, but looked somewhat embarrassed, annoyed, even apprehensive as though they found themselves in the dock of a court which they had earlier fled. Drops of water shone on Madhuri Ray's overcoat; Satadal Datta didn't remember to wipe his spectacles either.

But they were in the waiting room of Rajpur Junction, not in any court of law; there was no judge here, no pleader, no witnesses and no gathering of curious onlookers around them. There was no one here to ask them embarrassing questions. However, when they found themselves so close to each other in an undisturbed situation it was intolerable for them and both longed to get away from each other.

Madhuri's luggage was heaped over a bench and Satadal's on a table in a corner.

Satadal moved to the door and called out for the porter. He had decided to move out of the room with his luggage.

But where to? He didn't know. Some acute embarrassment made him leave the room. Perhaps he would go to the common waiting area where there was little light and no furniture, but at least he wouldn't have to face a vivid and painful shadow from his past.

No porter responded to his call but instead an attendant came in and said, 'Yes, sir?' and stood there, waiting for Satadal to tell him what he wanted. Satadal took a few steps towards the door, looked out—it was still drizzling—stepped back, as if considering what to say. He looked visibly annoyed with himself. It was quite unnecessary to be so disturbed by the presence of someone in the waiting room, there was no point in succumbing to some baseless nervousness. The attendant meanwhile mumbled, 'Would you like me to do something, sir?' 'Get me some tea, please,' Satadal blurted out as he drew a chair up to the table.

On the other side of the room, Madhuri Ray took off her overcoat and put it down on the bench, from which she pushed aside her luggage to make room for herself to sit more comfortably.

Two persons, Satadal Datta and Madhuri Ray, were waiting for their trains at the waiting room of Rajpur railway station. There was nothing common between them any more except the fact that they were both waiting in a railway waiting room. There was now no relationship between them—not now, not for over five years; but there had been before, and that too for seven long years. That relationship began some twelve years ago when Madhuri Mitra, then a pretty girl, was a friend of Satadal's sister-in-law, his brother's wife. They met at Ghatsila in the month of Falgun, when the air there gets heavy with he smell of wild flowers. It was there, one afternoon when Satadal and Madhuri had gone out for a walk. And that was how their relationship began. Within a year, their acquaintance developed into intense love for each other. And their love was formally acknowledged through

the registration of their marriage. However, within seven years, that bond of love became very weak, and they both agreed to legally separate through divorce.

Somehow it became clear to both that they did not love each other any more. Mentally they had drifted apart, and both of them, had good reason to get away from each other. They felt no urge to go on acting the expected role of husband and wife for the benefit of people around them, and so they separated without any fuss.

The love that was formed and matured in the fragrance of mango blossoms one *Falgun* did not last seven *Falguns.* One day Satadal had to go to Bhubaneswar for a week to supervise some work connected with archaeology. While he was packing his clothes in a suitcase in one room, Madhuri was reading a book in another. She did not come in even once till the moment of Satadal's departure. It was a bright winter morning, the sun came through a window flooding his room, but Satadal felt as if everything was quite pointless.

But that morning of *Paus* alone was not to be blamed. A Sunday afternoon in *Chaitra* of that very year also played a cruel trick. As on other Sundays, Madhuri was waiting, dressed up to go out for a walk. When in the adjacent room Satadal was busy preparing a sketch of a temple in the Chalukya style. He completely forgot all about the walk. As she looked out of the window, the reddish glow of the sky due to the setting sun appeared to her to be too short and a bad omen, for it would soon be all dark. She wished the sun would go down quickly without indulging in further antics.

Some similar happenings, one after another, made them both see that their love had withered away, or, perhaps there never had been any love between them—these indications were surfacing every now and then. Who knows which was true? Perhaps they could have known if they tried to; maybe they knew, or they didn't. In any case, whether they had

known or not, neither ever blamed the other. Both kept quiet even if they realised what had happened, or perhaps deliberately avoided making an effort to know.

It was even possible that each had secretly fallen in love with someone else. Anyway, the odd *Falgun* month of Ghatsila had lost all its charms. Perhaps the pain of the loss of that attraction pushed them further apart, making them seek solace in new companions, new relationships. Whatever that might be, neither of them had any regrets. Either both had made the same mistake or both had done the right thing. Neither could blame the other.

And they didn't. But they kind of hated each other. They couldn't forgive and forget. However, nothing showed outside in their behaviour. But a time came when it was just not possible for them to keep these emotions suppressed, and then they drifted apart. There never was any argument between them. They managed to get a legal divorce easily—putting a formal end to their seven-year-long relationship.

After a year and half of this, Satadal heard of Madhuri's marriage to Anadi Ray, an engineer, and Madhuri learnt from an announcement in the press of Satadal's second marriage to Sudhakana, a teacher in a sewing school in Calcutta. Both marriages were no doubt what's called a love-marriage. Whatever that might be, Madhuri was happy in her marriage. Satadal also believed, contrary to some rumours and remarks about their relationship, that he was happy with Sudha.

And so any questions and speculations in the cold waiting room at Rajpur railway station about their past relationship were quite unnecessary—they had buried the past long ago.

But the question was not of the past, but of the present; this sudden coming together so close to each other, at this unreasonable hour of night in the waiting room. . . why should such things happen when they had already taken calculated legal steps to be forever away from each other!

This was like a cruel conspiracy—illegal and unbearable. They could neither quite ignore what was happening, nor was there any ground to object. Neither of them would have felt uneasy if they met someone else. In that situation it would have been natural to exchange a few words of little consequence. But Madhuri Ray and Satadal Datta, though they had no relationship now, felt as though they were helpless prisoners in the thick silence of the waiting room.

Satadal Datta's loaded mind had, he didn't know when, sunk into deep silence. And then, his eyes closed into a soothing doze. As he opened his eyes, he realised he was in the waiting room and not far away, Madhuri was sitting on a bench, her face turned towards the wall, an empty look in her eyes.

Satadal didn't look away. His eyes became hungry with a desire to watch here stealthily. But what was there to watch? What was new about her? But wasn't there anything new? She never wore that type of crepe *sari*, in that colour of clouds, he remembered, and her *pallu* was never left so long. When they went for a walk she invariably wore some handloom sari, and when she walked, the rubbing from the foldings of her sari produced a hissing sound. And she used just a drop of that perfume of *hasnahana* on her *pallu*. That scent and that sound were inseparably associated with Madhuri when she walked with Satadal—without which he would not be content. There was no trace of that scent and music anymore. There was Madhuri sitting there in an alien dress and colour, like a doll created by a new artist to his taste. Satadal had never before stared at her so lustily. As he saw her now, he realised, she was no more the same person—but was quite different and stern, engineer Anadi Ray's wife.

Satadal suddenly felt relieved from an uncalled for anxiety and turned his attention to his own needs. He opened a small leather case and took out a towel and a cake of soap.

He untied his hold-all and pulled out a pillow and a sheet which he put on a chair.

Madhuri had no reason to look at Satadal. She was however looking at his reflection in the mirror—not deliberately, but it so happened that she could see his reflection in the mirror. She just looked on. She didn't feel any particular desire to look at him, but at the same time she couldn't resist the temptation of watching him unobserved.

She saw he was arranging his things quite naturally. He took off his wrist-watch, wound it and put it on the table. She noticed the watch was a new one, and the band was black which she never liked and so, to please her, he had never worn a black band. She also noticed a new ring on his finger. The pillow cover was not white but had a floral design on it. Satadal only liked soft, white covers for his pillows. In all this she saw the influence of the teacher of the sewing school.

Satadal went to the bathroom, taking his towel and soap. Madhuri now turned her face from the mirror and looked straight at Satadal's bric-a-brac left on the table. She got an opportunity now to examine his things. But what was she particularly looking for among his things? Perhaps she herself didn't know. But she continued to look at everything. They were all new—nothing there to remind her of the old days. She should not have expected to see anything she had seen before. However, if she could look at her reflection in the mirror she would have noticed that her two fine eye-brows had become a line prominent with envy. But she wasn't of course looking at herself in the mirror. She was absorbed in looking at Satadal's things.

There, his cases were open, his wrist-watch, his spectacles and his wallet were on the table. From the hook of a bracket a grey shirt was hanging, its golden buttons glistening in the light.

How careless she thought, to leave all those things in front of a person with whom he had no relation. He seemed to have no fear of losing his things. His trust was no more unusual than Madhuri's worry at the possibility of his losing anything. No one had made her responsible for his things.

When Satadal came back from the bathroom, Madhuri looked away again into the mirror. She noticed, although she could see only the upper portion of his body, that he had become much thinner. The teacher of the sewing school wasn't apparently paying much attention to that aspect of him. She, Madhuri, was seeing him after five years but she was quite sure, looking at him, that he was famished. She was quite right. Satadal opened a tiffin-carrier, from which he took out a few containers and put them down on the table. He was about to start eating, when something occurred to him and he got up. There was a *sarai* in the corner and he moved towards it with a glass in hand. This produced a sudden effect on Madhuri, for which she was utterly unprepared. It just happened. She looked straight at Satadal and appeared to be quite aggrieved. The way she looked at him, her frown and disapproval struck him as more natural than the gravity she had been hitherto maintaining.

She called out, 'What's the matter with you?'

Startled, Satadal looked at her.

Madhuri continued, 'It will not be unseemly if you just asked me to give you a glass of water.'

She got up and went up to Satadal. The frozen spirit in the waiting room seemed to thaw. The sound of Satadal's natural laugh melted her gravity. She took the glass from his grasp and said smiling, 'Why don't you sit down?'

This was a waiting room in a railway station. It wasn't their house on Cornwallis Street in Calcutta where at her birthday party, when they were both very young, she had taken him to a secluded, unoccupied room and served him food and entreated him to eat.

She poured some water into the glass, put it on the table and then started arranging the food for him on a plate. The frozen past of seven years ago seemed to come alive by the magic tinkle produced by seven her bangles when they touched the glass softly. At this moment they did not look like just two passengers waiting for their trains—rather like a couple sailing through life together, harmoniously without any hitch or friction. It didn't escape Satadal's notice that, although her fingers had become quite thin, she still handled the food as delicately as she did before. She stood very close to him, almost touching him, and he could clearly hear her breathing. The *pallu* of her sari had slipped from her shoulder on to his arms. She didn't pay any heed to that. There was nothing unusual about that.

'All this food appears to have been bought ready made from the market.'

Satadal sensed a tone of reproach in what she said. He knew she never fancied cooked food from the market. So he said somewhat apologetically, 'Yes, I bought all this at the Katihar market.'

Then she asked 'Where are you going?'

'To Calcutta.'

'Do you now live in Calcutta?'

'Yes, and you?'

It would have been better if these questions were never raised. Madhuri's hands shook a little. She appeared to have lost the ease of movements with her hands. Satadal's questions seemed to make her aware of here present condition. She moved away a little, somewhat embarrassed, and said, 'In Rajgir.'

There was nothing more to talk about. There was nothing more to ask and know about. One lived in Calcutta and the other in Rajgir. They were just two passengers who would travel on two different trains. Even then, due to some mental confusion, they had come too close to each other. That was

of course not quite proper and right, but for a while that seemed to them quite proper and right.

As there was nothing else to ask, Satadal said, 'Perhaps you have to take the train to Patna, haven't you?'

'Yes, you had better finish your meal,' she said in one breath and then moved away. It was true, she had to go away—for ever—by the Patna train. She hadn't come here to stay for ever. She looked anxiously at her wrist-watch and went back to sit on her bench.

The food was laid out in front of Satadal; light reflected from the glass which looked as if it contained some liquid fire. He appeared to be embarrassed again by the situation—mixed with much pain and a feeling of being mocked. Why did he allow himself to be mocked when he was fully aware of the illusion?

Suddenly, he stood up and spread himself out on a long easy chair with a shawl drawn around him and lit a cigarette.

He couldn't bring himself to eat. But why? He didn't even try to find an explanation to that.

The waiting room again turned into a waiting room, in which two unrelated passengers waited for their trains to come. But the trains did not oblige nor did any other passenger come into the room. However, the attendant entered with a tray and tea things on it—one pot of tea, a jar of milk, a container of sugar and two cups and two saucers. He put the tray down on the table and went out. Satadal glanced at the tea invitingly but the next moment he seemed to feel some resistance and turned away. Two cups on the tray. What a cruel joke! The man had no sense. Satadal hadn't asked him to get tea for two.

So, it wasn't possible to drink any tea either.

Even though she didn't quite look at Satadal to see if he was eating, she could sense that he was not eating, perhaps he was not going to drink the tea either. Such a foolish attendant—if he had even poured the tea for Satadal, he

might not have been so embarrassed. But then why was he so embarrassed? He was not in my uncle's house on that Christmas day in Madhupur!

They had gone to spend the Christmas holiday at her uncle's at Madhupur. The incident happened on the very first day. Satadal spent the whole morning sitting alone under a pine tree in the garden, and refused to drink any tea. And what was the reason for his refusal? There were many people in the house; above all there was Madhuri, but it was a servant who brought him tea. When the mystery became known, everyone felt embarrassed, and Madhuri was taken to task. Her aunt, two uncles, even the elder one who generally kept aloof—they all scolded her. The elder uncle said, 'When you know Satadal feels unhappy unless you yourself serve the tea. . . '

But this is a waiting room, not my uncle's house. It is not for him to behave like a wounded husband anymore!

What was surprising, however, was that the embarrassment seemed to touch even the depth of the waiting room. Even though the situation was as unreal as a scene on the stage, it appeared to be alive for the moment. There was no one here to rebuke Madhuri, to remind her of her responsibility, but she seemed to hear the clear voice of someone telling her, her duty.

'What's the matter, why aren't you eating?' There was a tone of gentle persuasion in her voice.

'I don't feel like eating all this now—at this time of the night,' Satadal replied calmly.

'Then drink the tea at least.'

'Yes, perhaps I will. What about you?'

'Did I ask for tea?' she smiled.

'No of course not. But now that the man has brought two cups by mistake. . . .' Satadal laughed a little.

'So, you think I had better drink.' There was no trace of any embarrassment in her voice. She was quite composed.

'That's really what I think. No use blaming the attendant.'

'True, no use blaming him.'

Both became as grave as before. Really why should one blame the attendant! There was a tone of regret in Madhuri's voice. Perhaps what she meant was that it was sheer bad luck that on such an awful night they were dumped together in an unoccupied waiting room in a railway station.

Either she had lost her strength to remain sitting quietly or she resolved to surrender to the demands of the accidental situation in the waiting room. She got up, went near the table and started preparing tea with her usual deliberation and finesse.

Satadal also got up and brought a chair beside his in front of the table and asked her to sit down too. She accepted the offer, for she found no good excuse to decline. Although they were both aware that some illusion was working in the waiting room of Rajpur railway station to draw them closer and closer as if they were husband and wife, neither had the will to come out of what was happening. Madhuri sat down on the chair beside Satadal.

Satadal took a sip of tea, exhaling with a sense of satisfaction. Surely that was not because of the mere taste of the tea—a touch of Madhuri's hand no doubt had gone into it to generate the satisfaction.

Satadal smiled and said, 'I was so uneasy seeing you so grave.'

'You felt uneasy—but what I felt I can't explain.'

'Were you nervous or what?'

She looked down and said, 'Yes, sort of...'

'But why? What's there to be nervous about?'

The conversation started in a light tone but towards the end it sounded weighed down with sadness. What Madhuri said seemed to reflect painful memories, and there was an assurance of trust in Satadal's words—the past was past and there shouldn't be anything painful in that, there was nothing to be afraid of.

They could now look back to their dead past caressingly in the same light as, after someone's death, people find it natural to think of and discuss only his good qualities, forgetting his difficulties and the unpleasant aspects of his character. As if all the hatred, fear and doubt of the past were burnt out in the very heat they themselves had generated. The past now appeared like a seven-year-long night of a clear sky full of stars, big and small, sweet and soothing. That such a sky was lost for ever was a painful realisation, hard to believe and one pines to get it back.

'You've become so thin,' said Madhuri looking at Satadal.

'And you, what about you?'

Madhuri was holding the cup of tea. He looked in her direction and observed, 'What have you done to your fingers?'

'What have I done?'

'They look so thin and frail!'

This made her feel so shy that she was going to cover her hands with her *pallu*, but an unsuppressable desire welled up in Satadal and he suddenly drew her hand and held it. Madhuri didn't resist.

This was indeed surprising. A patch of life's garden seemed to have been definitely discarded seven years ago, but now it appeared as if what had been discarded were the thorns and not the shade in that garden.

Satadal seemed to have suddenly discovered a hitherto unknown truth. He looked at Madhuri and said, 'You haven't changed a bit, you look exactly as before.'

Her looks hadn't changed but everything else had. Everything had been discarded but not the force of love. Is that possible? That was an illusion. Surely.

A rush of embarrassment flowed through Madhuri and she became red, destroying the illusion. She didn't exactly look like a young girl listening, for the first time, to a declaration of love; nor did she look like a bride meeting her husband in the bridal chamber for the first time; rather

she looked like a woman who, after a long separation, was being lovingly received by her husband with flattering words.

They were not in any lover's chamber. There was no privacy in the waiting room but Satadal and Madhuri continued to sit side by side, as if they would continue to do so for the rest of their lives—as if they would never separate.

When tea was drunk, Madhuri asked, 'Where does uncle live nowadays?'

'He is in Dehradun; he has built a house there.'

'And where's Puti?'

'She's married and lives with Ramesh. He has got a decent job in Delhi, at the Secretariat.'

He was holding her hand firmly—as if after a seven-year long fleeting illusion he had got it at last. Her hand was enclosed in his palms—lest he lose it again.

'You believe, don't you Madhuri?'

'Believe what?'

'I haven't forgotten you. I can't.'

'Why shouldn't I believe! I can see that now for myself.'

'But you, what about you?'

'Yes. . . .'

'Have you been able to forget me?'

Madhuri closed her eyes. She appeared to be getting ready to reply, shutting out all the reality around her. Her head leaned a little towards Satadal's chest, two drops of tears forming at the two corners of her eyes.

Satadal embraced her and drew her towards him and entreatingly asked, 'You must tell me, I won't let you go till you have.'

Then the loud gong announced that a train was about to arrive.

Madhuri struggled to free herself from Satadal's embrace. She felt as though she was held by two fiery hands. She stood up. The gong continued to sound, breaking the cold

silence of the night outside. The mirror seemed to be shaking. It was as if the waiting room was screaming, unable to bear anymore the illicit intimacy that had taken place in it. The Dhulian Up-Passenger train had arrived and people were rushing about on the platform.

Madhuri rushed towards the door and said, 'He should be coming by this train.'

A third passenger entered the waiting room. As soon as he saw Madhuri, his face lit up and he looked utterly happy. He was Madhuri's husband, Anadi Ray.

Madhuri also looked bright, but there was in that brightness a trace of sadness.

But that trace was enough to disturb Anadi Ray. He approached her in quick steps and asked anxiously, 'I hope you are well?'

'Oh yes, I am well.'

'I'm afraid you had to wait alone for a rather long time.'

'Yes!'

'There's really nothing I could do. The train was quite late—otherwise I would have been here a couple of hours ago.'

Anadi Ray started undoing a bedding with much enthusiasm. Madhuri objected, 'Please don't bother I'm perfectly all right.'

'You'll feel better if you lie down and take a rest.'

'Don't bother please, for such a short time.'

But Anadi Ray was not to be dissuaded. He opened a suitcase, took out a woollen wrapper, folded it once and put it carefully round Madhuri's shoulder.

All the while Satadal sat still on a chair and took in the scene, which struck him as funny as well as cruel and rather unbecoming. It was not possible, however, to remain still any more. He got up, went up to the door and looked out. Then he came back and needlessly moved various pieces of his luggage. He fidgetted like one imprisoned in

a cell in punishment. As though he was looking for some way to escape from this confinement and get some peace elsewhere!

What was happening was intolerable. The woollen wrapper appeared to have given Madhuri some comfort, removing all her tiredness from the journey. And that gentleman, named Anadi Ray, looked so proud and smug sitting there beaming with happiness. And Madhuri was like a bride in a fairy-tale, who after a brief pretence, garlanded her predestined prince, who would take her away in his chariot. And like a totally defeated contestant, Satadal looked on in utter humiliation and hopelessness. This was hard to bear.

But why didn't he flee the scene? What compelled him to suffer the humiliation of watching what was happening?

He could not go away because of one temptation—the temptation to know Madhuri's answer to the question he had put to her.

But why this temptation?

If Madhuri would only say she hadn't been able to forget him—that would give him the delight of a triumph and he would go away content.

But what kind of delight would that be? Satadal didn't know. He kept on staring at Madhuri, the picture of peace and quiet.

He suddenly came out of this state, for it dawned on him he might never get any opportunity to know her answer. Madhuri was putting on her overcoat. She appeared anxious to flee.

Anadi Ray also looked at his watch. Probably it was time for departure. The porter came; yes, the train to Patna was about to arrive.

Madhuri Ray, wife of Anadi Ray, stood very near her husband as the porter lifted their luggage on to his head. She was about to leave setting fire, Satadal imagined, to a combustible house.

That world of seven long years! Could one forget that by a mere act of one's will! Could one tear that away from one's life, throw that away. Madhuri was not going to answer these questions—there was now no opportunity for her to do so.

It would have been better if Madhuri could go away happily, walking beside her husband, not caring to look back. But she couldn't quite do that. The porters went out and Anadi Ray also took a few steps out of the room, but Madhuri, as she reached the door, stopped and, on the verge of her final departure, looked back as if to glance at the burning house she was leaving behind for which she felt some unearthly compassion.

Then she looked at Satadal and said, 'I am going.'

Satadal tried, unsuccessfully, to smile, while he was choked by an uprush of yearning and a sense of deprivation. There was little time to say anything. He would be comforted if she had an answer to his question.

'Yes, of course, you must be going—but you didn't answer my question, Madhuri.'

Madhuri stopped smiling, and asked, as if she was surprised, 'What question?'

She didn't reply. Maybe she had forgotten. But if she remembered the history of seven years, how could she forget what was asked seven minutes ago! Surely the world had not gone topsy-turvy within this period to make her forget that! Satadal was puzzled.

Madhuri repeated, 'I'm going. It's getting late.'

This was a rude shock which shattered Satadal's temptation and curiosity. He remembered Madhuri had a definite destination; she must get there without delay. He had no right whatever to get in her way. He made her delay for seven years but not now—he had no right anymore.

He looked crushed, 'I know you won't answer.'

She was calm, 'No answer is called for.'

'Why?'

'Because that's a very unfair question.'

'I see,' he said and stood up from the chair. But some foolish lingering temptation would not let him accept the situation. He persisted in looking the other way and what he blurted out was quite rude. 'You'll of course go away, but it was quite unnecessary to act out this funny scene.'

These were bitter words, and they made her stiff. She thought for a while and then smiled as before. Probably she resolved not to fan the flaming house behind her, rather she decided to try to put out the flames and make him laugh a little if possible.

She glanced at her wrist-watch and said, 'Please come to Rajgir once, won't you, with Sudha and spend a few days with us.'

'But why?' Satadal wondered.

'Why not, you can come if you just wish to.'

'And then?'

'I'll then see you two off at the railway station when you leave.'

'What for?'

'Because you would then get an opportunity to enact a funny scene.'

'What would you gain by that?'

Madhuri answered with a smile, 'No gain, but perhaps I'll also get angry and say some worthless words as you did.'

Satadal looked on for a second or two and then said, 'Now I see,' then he laughed out.

He spoke the last few words quite loud and continued to laugh. As if the temptation and desire contained in his worthless words now saw themselves in their true light and that realisation turned them into laughter. Satadal saw it all at last.

He looked at his wrist-watch and realised, without looking at the door, that Madhuri had left.

The combustible house did not catch fire; it reverbated with his loud laughter. Rajpur junction woke up. The train to Calcutta also arrived and there was some bustle on the platform which was on the other side; Satadal was walking briskly to catch the train, accompanied by a porter with his luggage on his head.

In the early hours of that cold night those two trains went in opposite directions. Rajpur junction would be quiet again. And what a drama was enacted in the waiting room involving two passengers. There would not be any trace or record of all that had happened.

For a while there were still some indications. Though looking at them one would not have thought so—a tray and two cups on it.

Translated from the Bengali by
DIPEN MITRA

Stains

Manjula Padhmanabhan

It was a tiny mark, barely visible. Yet Mrs. Kumar was holding the sheet between her thumb and forefinger as if she feared that merely to be in the presence of such a sheet might mean eternal damnation. Merely to know of the existence of such sheets.

She said, 'Blood.'

Sarah said, 'Yes,' while wondering whether she should apologize. 'I'm sorry,' she heard her voice say, 'I—I'm sure it'll go away.' She could hear herself sounding one foot tall. 'I mean—I'll wash it—'

Mrs. Kumar said, 'Come. I will show you.' She turned and left the bedroom, still carrying the sheet.

They went down two floors and into the basement. There was a sink there, deep as a well, cold, cracked and forbidding. A pipe jutted out from the wall. A pressure-valve perched at the end of it. 'Here,' said Mrs. Kumar, 'here you will wash it.' She dropped the corner of the sheet that she had been

holding into the sink. 'Wash now,' she said, 'it must not become. . .' She searched for the word. 'Stain. It must not become stain.' There was an antique cake of laundry soap congealed into a tin soap dish on the rim of the sink. 'See—there is soap—'

She glanced up at Sarah, then turned again and left. What had the glance meant, wondered Sarah. There had been something there, something. . . She shook her head and the bushy mass of her hair shifted on the back of her neck, feeling comfortingly warm and familiar. *Get this over with, she thought, just get it over with and don't let's think about it just now.*

She held down the release on the valve. A stream of liquid ice gushed out, biting straight through the tender flesh of her fingers and deep into the bone. She flinched, wondering whether there was any point wetting the whole sheet. She picked it up and scrolled through it gingerly, looking for the stain.

It wasn't easy to find, what with the all-over floral print, Faux Monet. Ersatz Klimt. But it was a blue-based design and the stain was there, finally. A single pale petal of dried, graduate-student haemoglobin amidst the heaving water-lilies. Sarah positioned the spot under the outlet and pressed the release. More arctic water. She reached for the soap tray but it had become cemented to the rim of the sink. She hauled the stain-bearing area of the sheet over to the soap-dish and scrubbed the cloth into the soap, which was rock-hard with age. It was minutes before it grudgingly yielded up its suds.

Then she held the material between her numb fingers and scissored it back and forth rapidly, to work the soap into the stain. Wetted it again, just a little, enough to see that the petal was indeed fading. Scratched at it with her fingernail. Looked around for a brush, but there wasn't one. The fine scum from the soap was under her nail now. A

faint blush of brown in the scum indicated that the stain was shifting. Minute particles of her being, her discarded corpuscles, were detatching themselves from the cotton fibres of the sheet, tearing free and riding up on the skins of soap bubbles so fine that she could only see them collectively, as scum.

She held the cloth under the stream of ice. The brown scum slid abruptly off the site of the stain onto that part of the sheet resting on the bottom of the sink. *Damn!* thought Sarah. She held the release of the valve down with one hand and tried to hold the sheet up so that the flow of water washed the scum clear of the sheet.

It was absurdly difficult. The sheet filled quickly with water, becoming heavy and unmanageable. There was a moment when she considered holding the cloth in her teeth so that the frozen lump at the end of her left arm could smooth away the traces of soap from the sheet while she held the valve open with her other hand. But she decided against it, ultimately. It would have looked ridiculous. And besides, she wasn't sure that her teeth could support the weight of the sheet, now several pounds heavier as a result of the absorbed water.

Ultimately she draped the bulk of the cloth over her right shoulder, held the valve open with her left hand and used her right to smooth away the soap. The stain itself had faded to a memory, its edges slightly darker than its center. But she rubbed it into the soap once more, flattened the cloth onto the palm of her left hand and scraped at it with the nail on her right thumb, scraped until it seemed to her that the blue of the underlying water lily was beginning to wear thin. Then, satisfied, she washed the scum away in the gelid water until all traces of soap had been obliterated from the sheet.

When she was done, she held the cloth up to look at it, stretching it between her two arms to do so. A film of

water which had clung to the surface of the cotton gathered itself up into an icy rivulet which flowed straight into the warm space between her hair and her neck, down her back and into the divide of her bottom, resting only once it had reached right upto the threshold of her most private self. It was like a cold electric finger tracing the length of her flesh, invading her warmth, violating her with its icy impertinence. Then it fell away and dropped to the floor.

She shivered. Realised that her nightie had got soaked and that she was standing in a dark, unheated basement, half-swaddled in a wet bed sheet. There was something offensive and illogical about it all which she would have to examine and understand and file away. But not just now. Later.

She went to the laundry room by the kitchen. Mrs Kumar was already there, bending over, stuffing a damp and faintly steaming wash into the round open mouth of the dryer.

'Uh,' said Sarah, 'excuse me?' Mrs. Kumar did not seem to hear. 'Mrs Kumar?' The old lady straightened up slowly. 'My sheet. . .' said Sarah, indicating that she'd like to include it in the load going into the dryer.

For a moment it seemed as if Mrs. Kumar hadn't understood what Sarah was saying. Then she shook her head, a quick bird-like movement. 'No,' she said, 'no! Not here! Only down! In basement!'

Sarah said, 'There's no place in the basement—' But she had been in a hurry to get away and it hadn't occurred to her to look.

'There is place,' said Mrs. Kumar and bent once more to her wash.

Sarah turned and went back the way she had come. Her mind was blank. In the basement, she looked around and saw that there was a light bulb with a dangling cord. She pulled on it and in the resulting light, saw that a potential clothes-line extended across the room.

She hung the sheet, turned off the light and went up two floors to the bedroom. Shut the door. She was shivering. She wrapped her arms around herself. *What's happening to me?* she asked herself. She was shivering with anger, not cold. *What am I doing here?* she thought. *What am I doing amongst. . . these people?* There. It was out. The words that had been hovering at the edge of consciousness for three days now. These people. Deep and his mother. Indians. Not-us. Foreigners. Aliens.

But not him, she thought. Only his mother.

Or was it? After all, he had lived with his mother these many years. It had to have affected him. What would he say about the sheet, for instance? Would he find some excuse, some justification for his mother's behaviour? Or would he see her, Sarah's, point of view? And if he didn't—wasn't that the thing which made his foreignness a problem? The fact that, instead of automatically seeing her point of view, he would flip it over onto its back and expose its soft underbelly, expose it for just another cultural blinker. 'Even you,' he would say, smiling with his beautiful teeth, 'have that Western bias which makes it difficult for you to see that there isn't anything intrinsically bizarre about being made to wash your bloodstain out of the bedsheet in a freezing basement sink!' And then he might cock his head to the side and say, 'Remember the horse-meat?'

She bit her lip. The argument had started innocently. On their way up to Deep's home from Cornell, they had driven past a meadow dotted about with Holstein-Friesians and she had nudged him. It had been a joke, nothing else. 'Wanna stop?' she had said. He had looked at her without comprehension. 'You know,' she had persevered, 'stop by and say a prayer or—or something—' But he had still not understood. It had begun to seem too silly to explain. 'Never mind,' she had said, 'it's not worth going into.' He had insisted, however. So she had said, 'The cows, you know?

We passed a meadow and it was full of cows and I thought. . .' His expression had been so blank that she would have laughed except that she knew he got hurt easily. So she stammered painfully on. 'Well, you know—I thought—since Indians worship cows—' But it had started to sound ghastly, even to her ears.

He had begun to nod in that quick tight way. 'You think it's funny, don't you?' he said, finally. 'Just one more laugh-riot from the cosmic joke book—the joke book in which everyone who isn't a Bible-thumping, beef-eating, baseball player is treated like a court jester. Everything we do, whatever we find sacred, is hilariously funny just because it's different—' And then the final rebuke. 'I thought you, at least, would understand.'

'Deep,' she had said, distressed. 'You've got it wrong.'

'What else can it mean?' he said. 'We've talked about this. I've explained it before.' He paused and she could see the muscle in his jaw tensing. 'About cows.'

She said, 'Deep—it's just that I saw them grazing and, and I—' She stopped. What had she thought? 'I thought of a cathedral. I thought that maybe for someone who worships cows, a big barn must be like a cathedral is for us—' Was that really such an insulting thought?

He had said, 'We discussed it just the other day. Didn't you hear me? When I told you that it isn't just any cow? That it is *specifically* the Indian cow?'

It had been her turn to look blank. 'You mean, one breed?' she had asked, astonished.

His face convulsed with annoyance. 'Don't be stupid!' he said. His face worked, as he tried to compose an answer which would make sense to her. 'It's not a question of breed,' he said, eventually, in a calmer voice, 'it's more subtle than that. In an Indian village, cattle are the foundation of life, an integral part of the family. Here? They're just beasts! Milk dispensers! Meat!'

Sarah could feel a charge building up inside herself. *Why are we talking about cows,* she thought. *Why aren't we talking about you and me?*

'Do you understand any of this?' he had said. 'I mean—you look into the eyes of one of these animals here and you see nothing. Just a dull, stupid, unreflecting stare!' His upper lip had lifted in scorn. Sarah couldn't understand why or how it could matter so much to him. Then his expression had softened. 'But—' he said, 'you look into the eyes of an Indian cow and there—you see it. Consciousness! An Indian cow is a developed being. She has a mind, she has a life, she is a person—no, better than a person. A sort of living manifestation of the, uh, bounty, the giving spirit of nature.' He looked at her, glancingly, as if expecting very little. 'For the Indian villager, the cow's milk provides food and income, its dung is used as fuel and the bullocks are a major source of draught energy. And on top of all that, they eat almost anything—they're part of the garbage disposal system!'

He smiled slightly now. 'Does it make sense now? Do you understand the difference?'

Sarah had nodded. 'Yes,' she had said, uncertainly, 'yes, I think I can relate to what you're saying.' She had grown up on a farm, till she was eight. She fought down a vague irritation she felt at the way he had described American cows. *How dare you insult our cows!* she had wanted to say. But instead she had said, 'We have that kind of relationship too, with horses—'

That's when he had said, scornfully, 'Oh yes! Horses! During the war,. you used to eat horsemeat! A truly nourishing relationship, wouldn't you say?'

'That's not true!' The words had whipped out of her. It was only the French who ate horsemeat!! Not Americans!! Never Americans!!! But the force of his contempt had drained her confidence. He was so often right about things like that. He seemed to store up tiny scraps of information just so

that he could produce them at crucial points in an argument. 'It—it's not typical behaviour, what we did during the war—' Even as she said the words, there had appeared in her head a question mark. *'We?'*

He said, smoothly arrogant, 'In India, there used to be terrible famines. But even at the depth of the famine, even when children were dying in their mothers' arms, there was never any report of cows being eaten. People were willing to die rather than eat their animals!'

'Well—' she had said, 'well—I think that's stupid! It's just stupid to die rather than to eat what's there—'

He had said, 'Oh? So—in a famine you'd eat your sister's flesh?'

'That's different!' But she had felt so helpless. He was implacable, when he had his teeth into an argument. 'It isn't normal to eat one's own species—'

'But we've agreed that wars and famines aren't normal times—!'

It had gone on and on and on. There had been no resolution. He had grown increasingly cool and confident while she had felt her cheeks radiating a black light and had heard her voice grow shrill and incoherent. Towards the end of it, she had found herself saying that she couldn't respect a people, a culture which didn't have the sense to avoid famines. He said that a few famines were inconsequential in the face of five thousand years of civilisation. She said that the ethical system to which she belonged could not view famines as inconsequential. Whereupon he had replied that he couldn't place much confidence in an ethical system which used, as its central icon, the tortured corpse of its religious prophet.

It had taken her a few seconds to understand what he had meant by that remark and when she did, it upset her so profoundly that her eyes stung with sudden tears. So she had turned her face towards the window. She didn't know what had bothered her more—that description of Christ or

her reaction to hearing it. She didn't think of herself as a believing Christian, yet it hurt her to hear that description.

They drove the last fifty miles in silence.

Deep's mother lived alone in an old two-storey building surrounded by majestic elms. She had probably been standing at the window looking out for the car, because the front door opened even as the tires purred up the driveway. Deep turned to Sarah and said, 'Will you be all right?' She was relieved to see that the sarcastic stranger with whom she had been arguing had reverted to being the familiar friend and lover of the last five months. She had nodded and got down from the car.

And yet. . . Standing at the window three days later, she knew that it hadn't been all right. That stranger, that alien, who had been at the wheel of the car dressed in Deep's body, hadn't vanished entirely after all. Having once appeared, he had continued to lurk, just at the outer margin of Deep's personality. Had he been there all along?

She hugged herself tighter. Why had Deep's mother wanted her to wash her bedsheet in the basement? What could possibly be the point of it? Then she thought of something. She thought of something she had heard her own mother and aunt talking about, laughing. A long time ago. She tried to focus on it, but couldn't. It had been too long ago and she had been a child at the time. She hadn't understood what they'd been talking about.

But it triggered another area of thought. In primitive communities, menstruating women sat separately, sometimes in a special hut.

Is that what she's doing with me? thought Sarah. Avoiding contamination. Avoiding the unclean magic of a bleeding woman. *Unclean.* Sarah felt a current of power course through her. *That reminds me*, she thought. *Time to change.*

She went to the bathroom and pulled down her panties. A scarlet streak told her that she was just in time. She

reached for the kit-bag in which she stored her tampons, while in the same movement sitting down on the toilet. She reached with her right hand under herself to find the string of the tampon, wound it around her finger and tugged, feeling all the while curiously self-conscious of all her movements. As if she were performing for some invisible camera crew. Twentieth Century Woman Removing Vaginal Insert. The tampon came out with a silky squish, and she released it, letting it drop into the toilet. Then stopped.

Why am I looking away at nothingness? she thought. *Why don't I ever look down when I do this? Why are all my movements so automatic?* And even as these thoughts appeared in her mind, a gush of simultaneous thoughts: *I shouldn't be thinking this way!* It was unseemly to look at one's menstrual products. It was unnecessary to think about what one was doing when one removed tampons. It wasn't proper. And yet. . . why not?

She wiped herself with toilet paper. Then made herself look at the results. *It's a beautiful colour,* she thought, *red and warm, like—like Burgundy.* She wanted to giggle. *Imagine being caught sitting on the toilet and looking at my own blood!* she thought, then added, with surprise. *Why do I feel so guilty? Why? Even when I'm just alone with myself?*

As if to augment this thought, she heard, from the bedroom, the door open and Deep's voice. 'Sarah?' he called. 'Are you in there?'

'Yes!' she answered and quickly dropped the toilet paper out of sight.

He opened the door and said, 'You're not dressed yet?' Then he caught sight of the kit bag with the tampons in it. 'Oh,' he said, 'oh. Sorry.' And shut the door. Sarah narrowed her eyes and smiled to herself. *Powerful magic, this blood!* she thought. *It can make a man apologise at ten paces, just at the sight of the equipment!*

By the time she was through with her bath Deep had already gone down. She found them, him and his mother, in the sunlit kitchen nook, with the remnants of breakfast on the Formica-top table. She didn't feel like eating anything and said so, pouring herself a mug of coffee. She could feel Deep's eyes on her but didn't look at him. He was encouraging her to eat what his mother had made, because, as he had already told her once before, it was rude to sit at the table and refuse food. *Too bad,* thought Sarah. *I'm not going to perform for him, for either of them.* If his mother could make all her meals without consulting her guests, then she, Sarah, could refuse to eat those meals without consulting anyone.

Mrs. Kumar started to speak to Deep, in Indian. Deep responded, muttering. He seemed to be arguing with her, but it was hard to tell. The language sounded that way. *A bit like Klingon,* thought Sarah. Full of explosive consonants. Deep said, in English, 'My mother says it's not safe to go hungry in. . . your condition. She says she prepared this'— he pointed to a disgusting looking mush— 'especially for you. To build you up.'

Sarah turned what she hoped was a blank look in his direction. 'What condition?' she asked.

The corners of his mouth were twitched inward in irritation. 'You are bleeding heavily, she tells me. Apparently you stained the sheets.'

Sarah said, 'Sheet. It was one sheet. And a very small stain.' She turned to Mrs. Kumar. 'Mrs. Kumar, I'm sorry, but I'm not hungry just now.' She spoke distinctly and slowly. 'Thank you for making something special, but I really don't need it.' Turned back to Deep. 'If it's all right with you, I'm going for a walk just now.' She smiled tightly and got up from the table, taking her mug of coffee with her and went out, walking slowly.

The front yard was fenced in with wooden palings. Sarah walked down the driveway and on to the road. There was

no sidewalk. Deep's father had been a surgeon with a good practice in this small rural community in northern Pennsylvania. He had died four years ago, leaving the property and a fortune in investments for his widow and son to live on in comfort for the rest of their lives.

Sarah's breath, augmented by the heat of the coffee, steamed busily out onto the crisp air. *They do well here for themselves,* she thought to herself. *These Indians, these aliens!* She was trying to see what it felt like to view a minority group with race-hostility. She was mildly amused to see that she couldn't do it easily, that she felt guilty thinking thoughts like that. Even though, going by the typical logic of race-hostility, she had reason to feel embittered about the soft life that Deep's father had afforded for his family.

Her own childhood hadn't been easy. Her father had grown up on a farm and later managed to buy himself a garage. He had struggled to put his five children through school. Only she and her sister had gone to college. Two brothers were still in school and one brother had died at eighteen, in a car accident caused by his own drunkenness. *Aliens! Aliens!* she thought, *But isn't it funny that I can't even think up a cuss-word for them?* Maybe they hadn't been around for long enough to be absorbed into the vocabulary of racial abuse.

She hadn't been walking for long before she heard quick footsteps behind her. It was Deep. 'What's the matter with you?' he said, panting slightly. He never wasted time with preliminaries. 'You've been acting strange since this morning.'

'It's your mother,' said Sarah. 'It's the bedsheet. I don't understand why she made me wash it like that.' She would have liked to add that it was more than that. It was the horse-meat, it was the prophet-corpse, it was the revelation that there were chasms between them, which would never be bridged. She didn't think that the visit was working. She would rather leave right away and not stay for Christmas.

'You're so hung-up,' said Deep, calmly, his face showing no sign of any emotion, his voice flat. 'She's just an old lady. Why is it so difficult to do something different for a change? To bend yourself just a little?'

'Deep—she wanted me to wash the bedsheet in a sink, in the basement, in sub-zero water! It's not just something different! It's something so stupid and unreasonable I don't know what to do with it! I mean, I thought we'd agreed that there's enough illogic in the world without having to add crazy out-dated customs to it!'

'What I don't understand is why you stained the sheets at all,' said Deep.

Sarah said, 'One sheet.'

'All right, one sheet, then. But why did you have to do it? It's not as if you don't know how to. . . be careful! I don't think it's at all. . . polite to do that sort of thing.'

'Polite!. . .' She laughed, gusting a thunderhead of white breath. 'What's polite got to do with anything! It's not polite for your mother to sneak around looking at our sheets either, you know!'

'It's your fault for not having made the bed in time.'

Sarah turned on Deep. 'I don't get it! Why does she have to come into our room at all? We're grown up, aren't we? I was still in my nightie, I hadn't even left the room and she was in there and making the bed!'

'Sarah—' he sighed. 'My mother's just a lonely old lady. She has no-one to talk to or fuss over when I'm not here. I don't think you can see how important it is for her to be able to do things for us—'

'For you, you mean!' said Sarah. 'It's not for me she's doing it, it's for you! Her little son!'

He shrugged. 'Okay, for me, then. But she's lonely—don't you see that? She needs to be needed. She needs to feel useful. Why do you make such a big deal about it? Why does it matter so much?' He was affecting to sound tired of

it all. The weary male worn out by the bickering of females around him. 'You're a feminist when it comes to young women and to women of your culture. But when it's my mother, who doesn't speak much English and isn't sophisticated, she's suddenly the enemy, the oppressor—'

'Deep, she's playing a power game,' said Sarah. 'Anyone can play it—you don't have to be a man or—or—white, or American. You won't see it like that, because she's your mother and the game works in your favour. But all these little things—the making of the beds, the not letting anyone else wash dishes or cook, she doesn't let anyone touch any of it—it's her way of maintaining control. Don't you see that?' She drew in a breath, sharply, the cold air hurting her throat. It was a hopeless discussion, because she knew he would never be able to see it her way. But she tried nevertheless. 'It's clear enough to you, when it comes to world events, when it's Russia controlling the flow of arms to Uzbekhistan—or the US controlling patents in the Third World. But when it's your mother controlling the flow of my blood onto our sheet? Oh no! Then it's tradition! It's being polite!'

He said nothing for a few moments. They were walking on the grassy verge along a larger street now, up a slight incline. The cars coming over the crest of the low hill seemed to respond to the sight of the two of them by swerving sideways, like skittish horses. Sarah wondered idly what the drivers thought. *Do they see a couple walking along*, she wondered, *or do they see a racial statement?*

Deep said, in a quiet voice, 'I thought we had something special.'

Sarah waited a space before saying, 'We did. We still do—I think—but—'

'But you've moved out of my reach. You're seeing me as a foreigner, as an alien.'

Sarah's head was swaying from side to side. 'No, Deep, no! It's not like that! Really!' Even though it was.

He said, 'I'm not stupid, you know. I mean, it's interesting to me. I thought you'd be different, but you're not, really.'

Don't react, thought Sarah to herself. *Be still now. He's going to say something. Hurtful. Brace yourself.*

He said, 'I thought being black must mean that you're more sensitive—but that was stupid of me, huh? Another kind of racism. When it comes to the important things, you're just an American. Just a Westerner.' His face was expressionless and his voice was perfectly bland. He could have been reciting the multiplication tables, for all the emotion he showed. But that was just his inscrutable-Oriental way. 'I thought you of all people would understand what it means to be an outsider. To be excluded from the mainstream—but obviously I was wrong.'

He continued for a short while, during which they were passed in succession by two Corvettes, a Datsun and three battered-looking station wagons filled with dogs and children. Sarah felt like a guest at a stranger's cocktail party, listening to the conversation with comprehension but no involvement. *I should feel insulted*, she thought, *why don't I feel insulted?*

They had reached the crest of the hill now and had stopped. Deep said 'What are you thinking?'

Sarah said, 'I want to go back. I need to change my tampon.'

During lunch, the dull ache in Sarah's lower abdomen became a concentrated mass of pain so fierce that she found herself gasping softly to herself, hoping that she couldn't be heard. As soon as she could, she excused herself to the bedroom and lay down. It felt good to be on her back, but the pain didn't let up. It was a small hard fist of pressure, a living presence. *It's just got to do its thing*, thought Sarah, *it's not actually malicious.* She thought of the lightless inner world of her pelvis and the mute scream making its inexorable way out of the avocado-shaped muscle in which it had been

held captive. *Come out*, she spoke to it, in her mind. *Don't be afraid. I won't deny your presence.* Instead of running away from the pain, she would disarm it with attention. *Come*, she thought at it, *let me look at you, let me understand your structure.*

It was dark, she decided, and glossy. A glossy pain. A deep, rich blue, royal in its own way. Forceful. Powerful. She could see it as a male entity, a strong, husky bellow. *But I don't resent you*, she thought, *isn't that interesting*? It was possible to look steadily into the center of the pain and in some undefined way, celebrate it. It was a trial by strength, a specialized type of wrestling match between her body and itself. There was no victor or loser, the struggle itself was everything. *You fill me*, she thought. *Here I lie, supine, while you, confined as you are to a passage no thicker than a pencil's lead, no longer than an AA battery, are able to irradiate my entire being so that I feel your heat from the farthest limit of my toes to the roots of my hair.* She thought of the sparking network of nerves which, moment to moment, sent in their bulletins of sensation from locations around the multiple dimensions of her existence, yet none of them could drown out the roar being broadcast from her uterus, from her cervix.

She smiled, her eyes shut, concentrating on fashioning something positive out of her pain. She didn't see Deep enter the room, walk silently around the queen-size bed and stop when he was by her side.

She opened her eyes.,

'Why are you smiling?' he asked in a whisper.

She paused before she answered, not certain that it was wise to share her secret. Then she relented. 'Because,' she whispered back, 'I'm in pain.'

'Pain?' His face puckered immediately in concern. He sat down, causing the edge of the mattress to buckle under his sudden weight. 'Is it serious? Have you taken anything for it?' His voice was suddenly loud.

'No!' She whispered, lifting her head off the pillow in her earnestness, 'No! I'm sort of. . . enjoying it...' She relaxed once more, taking his hand in hers.

Deep stared at her, frowning. 'I don't understand you any more,' he said. He had the kind of expression on his face that men get when they start to ask themselves whether the woman in front of them is experiencing a mind-altering hormonal storm. 'How can you enjoy pain?'

She said, 'I'm trying it out. You know, an experiment. I can visualise it, I can sort of imagine it as a—a—kind of—'

He said, 'How do you know you're not seriously unwell?'

'I'm just bleeding. It's a normal, natural event.'

He continued to look suspicious and unconvinced.

She shifted to her side. 'I don't know why, but it's different this time. It's not just blood coming out, but sort of *chunks* of stuff. So—of course it hurts. The pain is from expelling solid matter, from pushing it through the narrow passage—' She saw the expression of distaste on his face and stopped. 'What's the matter?' she said. 'You look as if you're going to be sick!'

He turned his face away. 'In India,' he said, 'we don't talk about such things. Women's blood. We just don't talk about it.'

She allowed a spasm to pass through her before answering. 'But Deep,' she said, 'this isn't India, this is here.' She paused. 'I don't mean America, either. I mean, this is Here!' She patted the surface of the bed. 'The special space we make between us, the space of just our own reality! No immigration officers, no bureaucrats to tell us what to say or how to sit and stand! We're the authorities Here, we're the ones who decide what we want to talk about!'

His head was moving about, he was hunching his shoulders in discomfort. 'It's not realistic,' he said, 'to think that way. We're private individuals as well as social entities,

affected by and affecting the realities within which we live.' He looked at her. 'You're not just Sarah, my girlfriend. You're also a—an American black, you have your history and your separate destiny. If I took you back with me to India, people would stare at you, they'd stare at your hair and your different race and my own relatives would reject you. Reject my choice of you—even though we're almost the same colour.' He looked at her now. 'I've told you this before but I don't know whether you've really understood it. I'd never be able to take you there. I'd never want to expose you to that kind of. . . humiliation.'

Sarah said, 'Deep, is that how you think of me? As a Black Woman?'

He shrugged, trying to wriggle away from the simple trap she had laid for him. 'I see you as Sarah. And as a woman. And as an African American.' Then he turned it around. 'You do it too! You see me as a foreigner, as an Indian! Admit it—the novelty is part of what attracts you!' He shook his head wearily. 'We can't wipe away our colours and our bone-structures! When we try to, we risk losing things which are important, we risk becoming cultural zombies—' He swept his arms wide, indicating the whole country, perhaps the whole western hemisphere. 'Isn't that what the West is suffering from? A loss of meaningful tradition?'

Sarah turned her face into the pillow and breathed a few times to suppress the giggle which she knew would upset him if he could hear it. She had an irreverent thought and wasn't sure whether she had the energy to express it or not. Then she looked up. 'We have TV,' she said. 'We have K Marts and Hollywood—' But he was already shaking his head. 'We have Star Trek and Superman. Freeways and credit —cards'

'No!' he exploded. 'It isn't the same! It isn't the same at all!'

She said, 'The only difference is, it's not old, it's not gilded with time.'

He said, 'This just shows how impoverished you are!'

Sarah said, 'And we haven't had generations of historians to show us how unique and precious what we have is because we still have it! It's not lost under some ocean or sunk under centuries of poverty! It's in the Coke bottles and in the chewing gum and the neon lights and—and—all the things that you sneer at so much!'

He paused a moment. 'And anyway,' he said, 'where do *you* fit, in this world of Superman and Star Trek? Those are the white man's myths—you can't claim them as your own!'

Sarah tucked a pillow into her belly and curled around it. A new fist of pain had begun to form and was forcing its way down and out of her. She would have liked to moan softly, but it would have created too much of a response in Deep. She didn't want to give him that satisfaction. She wanted to end the discussion. She closed her eyes and made her voice sleepy. 'Sure I can claim them!' she said. 'I'm American, right? They're part of me. . . even when I'm not a part of them.' She patted his hand away. 'Now leave me to sleep.'

He waited a few moments to see if she meant it, then got up and left, saying nothing. She continued lying on her side for a while, thinking about their talk and about the pain inside her, wondering whether it was abnormal after all and at what point she should seek medical help. She asked herself what she had liked about Deep in all these months. He had seemed gentle, she decided, that was what had attracted her. He wasn't a big burly jock. He didn't come on strong. He was cool, soft-spoken and always thoughtful. His colour was. . . well it was there, an added factor, but it was only colour, nothing else. It didn't go deep. She smiled at the pun on his nickname. Deep, short for Deepak. He said his name meant 'light'. A tiny flickering flame. When

he had asked her what her name meant, she had said she didn't know. He had teased her and at the time she had thought nothing about it. But now she realised, it must have been of consequence to him, one more sign of her inferiority on the scale of traditional values.

Something he had told her long ago returned to her mind. He had been speaking about his parents, how his father had come to the US. He had come as a student, stayed to become a citizen, set up his practice and then, when he had a respectable income, had gone home to India to have a bride selected for him. He had married Deep's mother after having met her once, formally, surrounded by all their relatives, unable to exchange more than two words of conversation. 'Tea?' she had asked him and he had answered, 'Yes.'

It had bothered Sarah, that story. She had asked Deep what he thought about it, whether he thought it was right for two complete strangers to get married. He had shrugged and said that they weren't really strangers. They both came from similar families, with similar customs and similar food. Aside from the detail of personality, they were very much alike.

Sarah had laughed at that phrase 'detail of personality'—'But personality's *everything*!' she had exclaimed, 'not just a detail!' Deep had got offended then and said that every culture had its traditions and it wasn't right to laugh at his. She had asked him if he would get married like that. And he had said, shuddering, 'No! Never!'

But she wondered about that now. He's American, she thought to herself, he's a citizen and yet it's only on the surface. Inside, he's this other thing. He had explained once that to be born into a strong tradition was to know the steps to an intricate dance which started with birth and ended with death. 'When you know all the steps by heart, you don't have to think any more—you are the dancer and

the dance,' he had said and she had loved the mystery, the poetry of it. It hadn't occurred to her to ask him what happened when a dancer found himself alone on the floor of a different tradition. Could the steps of one dance fit the music of another? Could classical ballet perform to rap?

The pain, having reached a peak, began to subside. She fell into a light sleep, awakening to dampness which demanded immediate attention. She rolled over the side of the bed to avoid bringing her bottom into contact with the bed and went to the bathroom. Blood darkened the crotch surfaces of her panties, her panty-hose, her jeans. It took her twenty minutes to wash away all traces of it. She started to hang the clothes up in the bathroom, then stopped.

Deep's mother might well come in here and find the clothes. She'd know at once what they meant. It was highly likely that she would demand that all Sarah's clothes be washed by hand, by Sarah, in the basement. *Once you entered the logic of clean and unclean blood, you could find your way around the maze fairly easily,* thought Sarah. The bleeding woman is penalized for being in that 'state': the correct condition, of course, is to be pregnant or nursing. Older women, like Deep's mother, had the loss of their own fertility as an added reason for wanting to punish younger women.

Sarah wrung her clothes out carefully and packed them into plastic bags. She started packing the bags into her backpack and then, without really thinking about it or planning anything, packed her other stuff as well.

Downstairs, the house was silent. Deep's car was not in the driveway. Maybe he had gone shopping with his mother. Sarah let herself out the front door, checking behind her to make sure that it was locked. Then she set off. Overhead the sky was grey. There were random snowflakes gusting about, but no storm had been forecast. Within an hour she had boarded a bus and was on her way back to Cornell.

It was evening by the time she got back to the apartment she shared with three other women. There was a message on the answering machine for her from Deep. 'Call me,' he said, 'as soon as you hear this. I need to speak to you. Are you all right?'

So she called him.

'Why did you leave?' he asked in his direct way. 'My mother was very upset. She said it was bad for you to travel while you were bleeding like that. She says you might get very sick. You don't understand her at all. She's really concerned for you.'

'Tell her,' said Sarah, 'that I'm all right. Tell her I like to bleed and that I especially like to travel when I'm bleeding. Tell her that I got stains all over the seat of the bus and that everyone knew, by the end of the trip, that I was bleeding because I had to stop so often to get off and change my tampon. Will you tell her all of that?'

Deep said, 'She asked me if I was going to marry you.'

Sarah said, 'Oh yeah?' and there was a silence.

Deep said, 'She told me that it was all right if I wanted to, that she liked you, that she felt you were right for me.' There was another silence. 'Sarah,' he said, 'What's the matter with you? Did I say something wrong?'

'No,' said Sarah, shutting her eyes.

'Look, Sarah—' said Deep. 'You know what I said? About not taking you to India?' Well, I was thinking about it, you know and I can see now that it could be all right too. I mean things have changed, even in India. My mother accepts you and that's big thing. I think it could be different. It *would* be, I'm sure of that, perhaps.'

Sarah said, 'Do they wear tampons there? In India?'

There was a pause before Deep said, 'Sarah, I don't think you realize yet what a powerful statement we can make by being together—'

Sarah said, 'You didn't answer my question.'

He asked her to repeat her question and she did. He said, his voice sounding stiff, 'I don't know. I don't know about those things.'

Sarah said, 'Well, how about your mother then: did she wear tampons?'

Deep said, 'Sarah, I don't think these are proper questions.'

Sarah said, '. . . or Maxi Pads? You could tell her that I'm thinking of changing from tampons to pads because I no longer want to hide my blood from myself.'

Deep said, 'Sarah, you *know* these are not proper subjects for discussion.'

'I don't know anything,' said Sarah, 'just now, except that it matters very much to me to have answers to these very things. Because—you know what? I've decided that the only level of culture I care about is the kind which makes my own life reasonable and intelligent. Listening to music and hanging paintings on the wall is very well, but if at the end of the day someone wants me to hide my blood underground and to behave like an invalid—forget it, you know? If that's what tradition means, then I say, take it off the shelf. Leave it out. My packet of ultrathin, E-Z wrap pads and what it represents to me about the journey my generation of women has made, is all the tradition I need.'

'Sarah,' said Deep, 'are you comparing five thousand years of civilisation to. . .' he chocked on the words '. . . feminine hygiene products?'

'Yes,' said Sarah and put the phone down.

Back to Square one

Gauri Deshpande

I wasn't all that keen on marrying Dhananjay. I mean, I liked him well enough but even in those days I was hardly foolish enough to marry a man for that reason alone. However, as it happened, I'd just finished my M.A. and was thoroughly bored with studies. Neither did I want to spend four or five hours every day, droning in the faces of a classful of similarly bored students. There wasn't anything else that I really wanted to do. And of course the clincher was that Dhananjay had asked!

In those days marriage was perfectly acceptable as a means of earning one's livelihood and passing the time. Nowadays you might find a woman or two questioning such assumptions but then it was all darkness. Mothers, aunts, sisters, friends—all the married ladies—were forever working on their unmarried acquaintances to get them into wedlock. I even wondered if it was not a case of 'do unto others as you have had done to you,' but not too seriously.

I didn't have an answer when my parents asked, 'What else are you going to do anyway?' So I said 'Yes' to Dhananjay. I thought, why not? I didn't really have any great expectations—a bit of money, a bit of fun, a few compliments, a little peace and quiet, that's all. It never occurred to me to wonder what he might expect from this marriage, and he never told me. Our wedding was considered 'modern' in those days. That is, nobody asked for dowries and saris and gold and diamonds, and we went to the Registrar instead of to the priest, and for our honeymoon we chose an out-of-the-way forest bungalow instead of the usual hill stations and honeymoon hotels.

I felt the first twinge of unease in the first month. But when we came back to Bombay to our flat, I forgot all about it in the daily grind. What happened was this: we were sitting in the varandah one evening, after about a week. I thought to myself I should really have brought with me that nice big novel I had always meant to read. In fact, with such a lot of leisure, I could have finished reading two. But when I said this to Dhananjay sitting next to me, he looked so stunned that I had a faint suspicion I should not have mentioned it. In fact, I thought he was quite annoyed with me, when that night he simply turned his face to the wall and went to sleep. I thought, see, this is the time that novel would have come in handy. But by then I had learnt enough not to say such things out aloud. The next day he was more or less as usual, yet that newly-learnt wisdom left behind a numb spot in my mind.

Once we set up house, time indeed passed quickly, just as the women's magazines had promised me it would. I mean there were their new decorating ideas and recipes to try out, and the daily maid to supervise, the shopping to do, the neighbours to get to know, to make myself more attractive and other millions of things to do. In case there was any time left over there were all those novels to read.

And I quickly became a member of a nearby library. Besides which, there was Dhana to chat with when he came home, and there were his colleagues and friends to impress when they came to see the bride. There really wasn't any time to indulge in twinges of unease, so I brushed aside the first one as the 'nerves' natural to a bride.

A year went by, and two; the flat, the recipes, the interior decoration, the new friendships, all became a bit stale. The large novels became a bit boring. I began to ask Dhana 'How was your day?' with excessive enthusiasm, and to recite to him whole passages from a novel I was in the process of devouring. He put up with it for a few months, then said quite diffidently, 'Why don't we have a baby? I mean, you don't have anything much to do anyway. . .'

Wait a minute, I thought, I surely knew better by now! Though I had found no real objection to getting married because I had nothing else to do, I didn't think giving birth to a child and bringing it up should be an activity to undertake only because one hadn't anything better to do. I said, 'What's the hurry? I'd rather look for a job instead.' He did think of objecting, but like I said, he was the sort of man who allowed things to take their course. And even in those days, getting a job was quite an acceptable way for an educated woman to pass the time (but not to earn her livelihood!)

After looking around for a while, I did get a job—a little one to be sure, but a job. Woman-of-all-work in a small magazine. From proof-reading, taking ad-blocks to the press and making the tea to filling in few lines on a short column. The ease with which I slid into that job amazed me. I became an expert at proofs, I ran like a gazelle to the press, I filled columns like to the manner born. I became the Editor's family friend. I did crosswords with the typist. I got addicted to paan because of the office boy. And the Assistant Editor began to advise me on how to choose the best crab. I began to grumble about Sundays.

I almost opened by mouth one Sunday to say this to Dhana, but that numb corner of wisdom throbbed at the back of my mind and spread itself a bit further as I swallowed the remark. I showed Dhaina my first pay-cheque with pride, and bought him a tie and took him out to dinner and reminded him to put it in the bank in his account. Being a 'modern' husband, he suggested a joint account, and I immediately thought of one of my own. Why not? When I said it, he looked a bit taken aback, but said, 'You can give my reference at the bank for opening yours.' I was thrilled. I felt liberated, fearless and economically self-reliant.

And so we should have gone on living happily ever after. I was the object of my relatives' and friends' envy. If any said, 'Lucky your husband lets you work!' I would reply, 'What do you mean, "Lets"? I never asked him. Just told him I was going to work.' This wasn't the strictest truth, but all the poor housewives and mothers-of-children would look at me in wide-eyed admiration and applaud my independence and decisiveness.

Our little magazine was devoted to economics, commerce and trade and politics and featured incomprehensible tomes and equally unintelligible reviews. I found I could understand most of what they said on the strength of an M.A. and that too an English Lit. M.A.! I felt quite their equal. I wanted to do something they would see and approve. I said to the Editor, 'I can see that ours is not a magazine with any literary leanings, but wouldn't it be nice to have a review or two of an important novel every couple of weeks or so?' He frowned at me and asked, 'And who is going to write it?' 'I am!' I said. 'Well, I'll think about it,' he answered. I pointed to *The Economist* lying on his table—he thought of his little mag as *The Economist* of India—and said, 'Even *The Economist* publishes literary book reviews.'

This argument worked and he agreed, but said, 'No extra money!' 'Except for the books.' 'Only two per month!'

'O.K.' I almost ran out to buy the two books and brought them home to read in front of Dhana on the pretext that I was too busy at the office to read them. Then I sat and scribbled a review which was published the following week with my by-line. I had arrived. I was also a reviewer now, and fame was around the corner.

And then I happened to receive his novel (*The other Shore*) for review. His is a well-known name so I won't say it, but only that such 'he's' are bound to crop up in the lives of such 'me's'. And so he did. It was a good novel and I wrote a favourable review and he wrote to thank me and I wrote back a few critical comments and he sent me his new work...

We were utterly ripe for falling in love when we did finally meet. I would have fallen in love with him had he been a two-headed monster; on the contrary he was attractive, witty, intelligent, single, and a novelist. I can see now that he must have been quite used to making women fall in love with him, but at that stage in my life I had never met anyone like him. And for some strange reason, he too, began to love me. What started out for him as a practised flirtation ended up ensnaring him. He was caught in his own pretty words and significant glances and brilliant smiles.

While we were having a beer in the restaurant of his hotel, I told him the story of the little numb corner of my mind, and he burst out laughing. Then he pushed his chair back, pouted his lips and getting up, said, 'Come on, come to me.' I swallowed and looked up at him, breathless. He ran the joint of a crooked index finger through his bushy moustache and extending his hand to me, smiled. It was good to have the hand to hold on to, because I could hardly stand up.

I can honestly say that it didn't occur to me to debate the rights and wrongs of my action. I was so sure that all that was happening, becoming, rushing, tumbling, roaring,

lashing and breaking over me had nothing to do with my smooth, peaceful, monotonous life with Dhana. All this was happening to my own me or 'his' me, not to Dhana's me. Such a thing had never overtaken me before. He had to leave the same evening. I, who never shed a tear over *David Copperfield,* was now crying as though my heart was breaking. He was astonished too. After trying vainly to stem the flow of tears, he at last held me close to him and said, 'Don't cry! Come on! Don't sweetheart! Listen, I won't leave tonight. I'll stay right here and hold you tight! O.K.? Come on! Don't cry! My poor child!' And instead of quieting me, his loving words made me cry all the more. I could hardly comprehend that he—the same one—was willing to throw away his plane ticket, his reputation, his work, all just for me! I managed to control myself and said, 'No, no! You must go, and so must I!' And I felt a twinge of guilt for the first time.

After I came home I felt I was really going out of my mind. My body, glowing with his touch, began to shrink from Dhana's. Not that Dhana had ever lavished his touch on me! Every night after putting out the light he would pat me on the head and drop a fleeting kiss on the corner of my mouth and say 'Good-night.' Sometimes the Goodnight had a questioning lilt and if I responded, he would proceed and if I did not, he would go to sleep. Now I began to pull up the sheet to my chin and pretend to fall asleep with my face to the wall long before he thought of putting out the light.

I had read in poems about a day being as long as a year but now I found out that it is really, literally true. I thought that every moment which wrenched my mind away from my dreams of my lover was my mortal enemy. Dhana was the quiet sort and when my chatter had fallen quiet, silence reigned in the house. All evening I sat with a book before my face, trying not to cry. He looked over some files

or the newspaper. There seemed to be nothing to stop me from giving in to the impulse of jumping out of the window.

After some days (weeks? months? years?) he wrote: 'My silly child. I'm in love with you. Quite against my wishes. Come to me! Come to me quickly.' I sat in the office holding the letter in my hand, staring at the large numbers on the calendar on the opposite wall. Remembering his tickly moustache, his hands, his voice, I shivered. I was about to hide my face in my arms when the Editor sent for me.

Sighing, I put the letter in the desk and went. He said, 'Listen! We must print an interview with the Deputy Chairman of the Planning Commission. And fast. I have to make up the pages for the festival issue. He says he hasn't got the time to write an article but is willing to give a few hours over the next week if I send someone to interview him. Will you go? I can't spare anyone else. You will have to stay in Delhi for four or five days. You record the interview on cassettes and bring them back. We'll transcribe and print it. You can leave right away. Will you?'

I could hardly speak, I was so filled with happiness. I could now spend four or five days with *him*! Four or five days and nights—all the time left over after each day's interview session. Perhaps a whole week! The Editor thought I was hesitating, so he said, 'I'll pay the air-fare and daily allowances.' I said, 'Then give me a week off afterwards, so I can do a bit of sightseeing!' God knows how I said this so casually! He said, 'But not allowances for that week!' I nodded and ran out. A whole fortnight! I cabled him, called Dhana to say goodbye, dashed home to grab a few clothes and flew to Delhi taking the first flight available.

And a whole lot of things happened which everyone knows about, and if they don't, won't understand by my telling them. . .

The Deputy Chairman was a brilliant man: huge, bald, harsh-featured, rough-voiced and so keenly, sharply

intelligent—every interview session would turn into an argument, a lecture, a seminar. He would quit only when his secretary insisted on taking him away to his next appointment. And then I would run to *him*. . .

When at last the interview was over, I had four or five hours' conversation recorded on cassettes. My lover said, 'Enough of this bloody town! Let's take off!' And we took off for Ranikhet. The silence and solitude of the deserted Club, off-season. We dumped the luggage in our room and went for a long walk—holding each other, looking at each other, tasting each other—and rushed back to make love and went to sleep sated and tired, only to lose ourselves in each other again. . .

Towards the end of the day we sat on the deep cane chairs in the varandah, tired and fulfilled, loose and limp like rag dolls. There was so deep a silence everywhere that I could even hear bubbles in the soda-siphon. I gently put my glass down on the table and languidly got up. As I was crossing behind his chair, he reached up and captured my hand. Rubbing his cheek and his silky moustache on it he said, 'What is it, my love?' And I answered dreamily, hazily, in a murmuring voice, 'I just thought I'd listen to all the cassettes at one go—I have a lot of leisure now after all!'

He pushed his chair back and got up so suddenly, it went crashing back against the wall. He didn't even think of letting my hand go. He just stared at me, stunned, for a few moments then began to laugh. And I stared back helplessly at his laughing face.

Translated from the Marathi by
GAURI DESHPANDE

The Question

U.R. Anantha Murthy

Was it indeed a tiger that roared at dusk? Or, was it a delusion of her idle mind? Sharada listened intently as she drew water from the well. It could have been a tiger. A wounded one, Koraga had said, hit by a bullet in the forests of Andagaru. It had fled that forest to take refuge here. She had heard the story many times over the previous four days.

She placed the pitcher on the wall of the well.

She had pleaded with Maviah (Shankariah) not to use that well for water as her sister had killed herself by jumping into it. Let's dig another, she had said. She could see her face reflected in the water as she bent over the wall during the day. She had the same face as her sister and was afraid. The cradle had been infested with white ants. She hadn't mentioned it to Maviah. He would have been upset as it was an heirloom. Every nook and corner in it full of cockroach eggs. She should remember to wash it with hot water the following day.

She threw out a little water from the pitcher and balanced it on her waist.

Wasn't it *Chaturdashi*? She would start her periods on *Bidige*. Should send for Gowramma and ask her to mind the kitchen. Should make sure that there was some beaten rice in the house. She was getting to be very forgetful of late. And the nightmare of the previous night in which she had died. Reassuring her on that score, Maviah had said it was an auspicious sign to dream of one's own death—it meant that she would live long. Dreams of death by drowning were even better. . . It was nothing but superstition according to Ranga. She remembered sitting up in bed, afraid.

Keeping the pitcher beside the stove, she blew into the fire which was giving out smoke. Years of practice hadn't helped—the firewood she placed in the stove wouldn't catch fire and burn. Ranga was an adept at building a fire. She would partake of the *palahara* which she would get ready for Maviah, wouldn't bother to cook any rice for herself. She felt like yawning—someone must be thinking of her. Must be Ranga. Who else?

She yawned and picked up a copy of the Kannada version of *Shakuntala*. A dog-eared book from the days of Maviah's father. Damn it, even reading a book was a bore. Must write asking him to send a new book. Utterly bored, she couldn't stop yawning. There were four *shlokas* in the fourth Act. Let me hear them, girl, Maviah had said. Earlier, it was his father who read out things for him. She had taken the task over now. Something anyway to while away one's time.

She placed some water on the stove for decoction. A decoction of cumin seed was good for Maviah's digestion. Drinking endless cups of coffee, Ranga had been reduced to mere bones. She must arrange for the tinplating of all the utensils. Must send for Budan. How forgetful she was of late!

There was the sound of slippers on the stairs.

* * *

She reached the hall and stood speechless as she looked at Ranganatha. Memories of all that happened four years earlier came to her though she pulled the *pallu* of her white saree over her body and gathered her loose hair into a bun, wanting to look as if she was bereft of any emotion. Words failed her as she thought of making a light-hearted remark about her having heard a crow caw that afternoon and so knowing that some relative would visit her. Maviah though blind, had brought her, an orphan child, into his house and looked after her as if she was his own. . . No, Ranga had little faith in such words. 'Cut out such words of grief, they are only a show.' he would say. If she said that she couldn't desert Maviah in his old age, he would toss the word 'desert' around saying what a fine word it was with a cruel leer. Things had taken their own course and she had got used to it. Why did he have to come again? He had gone away saying he would never come back. He had changed a little—his hair was no longer parted in the middle but on one side. He had cut his hair short and grown a moustache though she had asked him not to. And there he was, staring hard at her.

His look was harsh. The way he clamped his lips seemed to imply that he knew all that passed through her mind, that her words were contemptible cliches, utterly untrue. Helpless, Sharada sat down with her back to a wall, anxious about what awaited her, and looked at Maviah.

Shankariah's blind eyes opened and closed on the darkness as he talked on without waiting for any response from Ranganatha. There was a typical Malenad drawl and softness about his words.

'How is your mother? Have you come down to collect rent? This year the yield of beetle nuts has been poor because of the disease that hit them. The price too has come down. Will you stay with us for the day? Remember, you can't have your food here in this house. Otherwise, both of us will have to pay a penalty to make amends for such impropriety. We

shouldn't ignore the vow just because it comes down to us from the days of our great grandfathers. Listen to me, Ranga. How on earth can I say that you shouldn't eat with us? I know it's against the dharma of a man with a family. Your mother and you are part of our family, it's true. But, there are these do's and don'ts laid down by our elders. No man's life is utterly free.'

Ranga shifted his eyes from Shankariah sitting against a pillar to Sharada who sat huddled in a corner. He knew that any response from him would sound hollow. He stood up unable to think of anything beyond a mechanical yes in response to what Shankariah said.

There was a pallor of death around that ancient house in the heart of the dense Malenad forest, Ranga thought. A couple of Shudra households nearby and that was the end. A sense of emptiness. The same grey idol of Ganapathi with a broken trunk, in a niche on the wall—he had caught it in the flowing stream and brought it for Sharada. The clock on the wall must have been running slow for some time to show that hour. A chest in the corner, smeared with vermilion. Shankariah with his walking stick, hesitantly feeling his way. And Sharada, hopelessly sentimental, who would sit down to compose poems which were like the Dasa's songs of praise when the household chores were all over. What was the word in Kannada for 'frigid'? Had he known it, he could have explained its meaning to Sharada. She wouldn't ever rock a cradle or run about in excitement—a pregnant woman on the occasion of her *seemantha*. No children in tears, no laughter from the mother as her child pissed on her lap, no songs, no celebrations.

A cat mewed and jumped down from the attic. A black cat. Sharada got up to go to the shed and milk the cow.

'Give me the lamp, I'll hold it,' Ranga said and went with her.

* * *

Shankariah got up unable to control his hiccup.

Why hadn't Sharada placed a pot of water in the corner as usual? No response when he called out for her. How could she have the heart to leave a blind man like him in the house and spend time talking to Ranga? He wouldn't be surprised if she were to discard him in some corner and go away. Not easy to define the nature of the spell Ranga cast on her. It was on account of him that he had proposed to look for a pious boy who was well-versed in things like *puja*. He had pleaded with Sharada to agree to marry such a boy. Not she. He had then asked whether he had brought her up only to have her wed the peepul tree and she had kept silent. Ranga wasn't the type to settle down there. He knew English and the delights of the city. He had leased out his farm and gone away to Mysore with his mother. Wasn't it more than four years ago? Yes, he was right. *Vilambi*, *Vikari*, *Sharvari*, *Plava*, *Shubhakritu*. He left the place in *Vilambi* and it was now *Shubhakritu*. It was his lot to count days as they passed. His father kept telling him that he shouldn't grow peevish in old age, that he should exercise control over his mind. He would all the while be working on the charkha, for his sacred thread. His father there and he, the blind one facing him. The tongue started itching when one's hands failed. Who would listen to the words of a senile man like him? If one went strictly according to custom, Ranga shouldn't even touch water in their house. The young ones of the day would turn a deaf ear if he were to say that it would do them no good to break the customs which had come down from time immemorial. 'There's something called truth, Shankara.' his father would say, 'Even the Gods have to submit to its rule. Man's efforts changed nothing. Man should make God's will his own desire. Bhishma had been granted the boon of choosing the hour of his death. He died when he knew that his work on earth was done. It was *Ekadashi*, and his father was in bed running a temperature.

'Let God's will be done, Shankara,' he had said, had a cold water bath and shut his eyes. Why should he, a dead piece of wood, insist on having his own way? But, his was a body that had been nurtured by salt and spices. It was not wrong to love but it was wrong to be infatuated. He remembered his father's warning about how difficult it was to know when love turned into infatuation. Sharada's sister killed herself because she got pregnant. Who could say what God had willed for him in his life-time? It was nothing but delusion to believe that he was the master of his own fate. He had asked Koraga to plant a hundred areca saplings and the fellow had not shown his face since then. No end to his misfortunes—a tiger had stood in front of the house at night and roared and Sharada had forgotten to add salt to the curry while preparing lunch. He was, of course, very forgetful but what was the matter with that girl? She must have been upset by his peevish behaviour. One should not hang on to life after losing control over one's body. He would consider himself to be blessed if only he could die before he lost his hold on his bladder and bowels. Oh, God! He had to crawl on all fours towards the kitchen, feeling his way along the wall, like a child looking for his mother. There, the pillar just beyond the crack on the wall. Then there would be the threshold, a few feet away, and the patterns which his mother had drawn with powdered *rangoli*—he could still trace them with his fingers. A turn to the left would bring him to the puja room. He would not be surprised if Sharada, in her excitement about Ranga's visit, were to forget to light the lamp in front of the idol at dusk. On God's pedestal, a goblet with the Ganga water. His father had closed his eyes for ever after taking a sip of the holy water. He had hoped that Sharada would be there to give him a drink of the same water when his end came. There would be the churning staff if he walked straight along the wall. His mother, grandmother and great grandmother had all sat in front of

the staff, making curds. He could vividly recall the morning carols they sang while churning: Wake up, Narayana, Wake up Lakshmiramana! It is morning, wake up. Next to the churning staff, a water container and on the shelf above, a tumbler. Everything it its place ever since his childhood. Sharada might desert him, but not the layout of the house which was indeed a part of his own body. It would not trick him, a blind man. Sharada, oh, Sharada, why was there no water in the container, girl. . .?

'Ayya, Ayya. . .'

'Is that Lacchi?'

'I heard that Rangiah has come for a visit. I put some water on the stove for my bath and came here to check. . .'

* * *

Shankariah groped his way out and reached for his tobacco pouch. 'You said that you slept badly last night. Shall I massage your head with oil, Ayya?' Lacchi asked. 'I haven't had my *palahara* yet. More than that, this dead piece of wood, my body, doesn't deserve such attention. Don't you have anything better to do?' His hand ran over his stomach. Full of gas. He sighed.

'By the way, girl, I may have to give Sharada to Rangiah in marriage. I can't have my way if fate has willed it otherwise, can I?'

'Didn't I suggest it ages ago, Ayya? Have her marry Rangiah and you go and live with them. You are no burden to Rangiah. Don't worry about your lands here. Give them to me on lease. I'll tend them and bless you for providing me with a living. Aren't I, in a way, your daughter too?'

Feeling that she had perhaps said too much, she covered her mouth with the *pallu*.

'It's not that simple, girl. Look, all this has come down to us from our ancestors. If only she could find a boy who is willing to stay here and look after the land. . .'

'Shall I tell you something, Ayya?' Lacchi intervened. 'Let's forget what happened to the other girl. Our folk here shouldn't start wondering why you haven't got this girl married. The affairs of your family shouldn't become the talk of the town, should it? Don't go against the girl's wishes. Have her marry Rangiah and you. . .'

'Out of the question, girl. You aren't making sense. This house is part of me, remember. Leaving it will be my death. Do you want me to turn into a helpless exile? I'm sure you know this: It seems Rangiah's great grandfather and my grandfather fell out over a paltry thing and vowed that their families would have nothing to do with each other. Go on, say it if you want to, that such a thing shouldn't be allowed to shape Sharada's life. Let things take their own course, I can do nothing about it. But, surely, I can't be expected to give her in marriage to Rangiah. Our forefathers will end up in hell if I were to go against their wishes.'

As a gecko made a clucking sound, Shankariah exclaimed, 'True, true.'

'What are you saying, Ayya? You are the one that brought her up. When her father deserted his family you brought her here because she was your sister's daughter. Tell me, which is dearer to you now, the umbilical cord which binds you two or your land and the vow your family made in your great grandfather's time? You Brahmins, and your ideas of grandeur! The Shudras are a much better lot, let me tell you. It's the end of the matter when they pay a penalty to Panjurli for their transgressions.'

Shankariah's fingers closed on the ring tied to his *yagnopaveetha* and considered her question. He, who had kept himself in touch with the outside world through his groping hands and his sensitive ears, felt unequal to the question. Everything was losing its meaning. His hold on the life around was no longer firm. It was only in one's youth that either an austere form of renunciation or a burning passion

was possible. When old, one was left with nothing but ennui and the restlessness of a vague desire. Life around was slipping through his fingers. A footfall was enough to make him curious to know who the caller was; and anguish because he could not clearly hear the words spoken. No way of knowing whether it was day or night. He remembered his father's words: It's time to rest at God's feet when one's limbs give up, Shankara. We shouldn't be a burden on our children. . . How true! Nothing was working out. Even Koraga ignored his instructions to plant saplings. Why should he reduce himself to the status of mere dirt under others' feet? There was his orchard which had fed his family for generations and his house. It was his great grandfather who had levelled a hill to grow the orchard, it seems. It was his lot perhaps to feel fulfilled, looking after it. There was no point in his futile longing for things—it was like an impotent man's rage against himself. Let others chalk out their own ways to happiness. He was anyway helpless.

* * *

Sharada spoke as she washed the cow's udders.

'Don't stand there in your white clothes before Gowri. She's a wild one.'

Ranga moved to her side.

'I heard about your sister's death. Why did she have to jump into the well?'

'She was three months pregnant.' Sharada's words came out hesitatingly.

Ranga was so furious that he could not immediately grasp the meaning of her words. The dead girl's ghost stood between them. Sharada must have convinced herself that sexual pleasure was an unmitigated disaster. She was anyway an ascetic type with her face turned away from life.

'It was you and your uncle that killed her, Sharada. What is so wrong about a child widow getting pregnant? You could

have caught hold of the fellow who made her pregnant, forced him to marry her and let them go somewhere else to carry on with their lives. Instead, your uncle must have cursed her and all of you must have joined hands to humiliate her in various ways.'

Ranga could not understand the problems women faced, Sharada thought. Her sister had gone about for a while pretending that it was a bout of malaria. She had hugged Sharada one night and cried her heart out as she came out with the truth. Sharada was scared and her reaction had been one of disgust. Her sister had been upset by Sharada's reaction and had asked her about it. She had kept quiet and the girl was dead by the following morning. Both Sharada and her uncle had known that the girl was with child.

'Tell me, Sharada, why didn't you take somebody's help and arrange for abortion? That would have been better than her dying. One of my father's sisters got it done, it seems. What we are all doing under the thin cover of respectability is to turn our faces away from reality.'

Sharada was angry. 'It's easy for you to speak in this manner, isn't it? We have to live among people in the village, remember. Not you. With the 'family's affairs on everyone's tongue. . .'

'Cut out all this talk of your family's honour. Damn your family. . .'

As soon as one's mouth opened, the talk was about what people would say. And a show of grief pasted on the head-to-toe-covered women's otherwise expressionless faces. Words, heard and spoken ever since childhood, mere cliches. Experiencing real life was something entirely different. One's life was arid and beliefs meaningless because of the break between faith and living. Parvathi was a better sort—she, who spent her time dully making cotton wicks, had enough gumption to get pregnant. Ranga could not have imagined such a thing—a fresh breeze had blown into Shankariah's

house of ghosts. But the girl had killed herself and destroyed everything around. She had died after having blackened the night some more. And she had snatched Sharada away from him. What else could she have done? Had he been there, he would have secretly arranged for an abortion and saved her life. What she had heard from everyone around was that she was a widow who had kept her hair and so water from a hairwash should not touch the ground and sully it. Her whole life was spent in the company of either widows or of tired women who helped themselves to food only after serving their husbands. May be, fate had willed that a woman should get only that much out of life, nothing more.

But his Sharada was not like them. She was not given to sitting with women, gossiping. She could be by herself. Her aloofness was striking enough to catch one's eye even when she was in a large crowd. She was a loner. A lift of her eyes was enough—it was speech itself. What a vision she was, sitting in front of the structure which housed the *tulasi* plant, making designs with *rangoli*!

Sharada milking the cow, with the white *pallu* of her saree over her head, her body a prim knot, was a beautiful marble tomb. One should stand at a distance under the moonlight and watch her. *Yakundendu tushara hara dhavala yashubhravastranvita.* White *kunda* blooms, a white moon, a necklace made out of white foam, a white *dukoola* on her body, and she like a *raga*, a creation of the mind, pleasing. Her beauty was like that of the autumnal season—pure, mellow, without spring's excessive enthusiasm. There was no showing off with resplendent colours. Yes, it was like the lamps lighted during *Karthika*—tapering flames, pleasing and burning steadily. She was a *parijata* blossom which would surely wither if touched. He was startled when he returned from Lacchi's house, seeing her sitting there cleaning rice grains. Words had died in his mouth. She was like camphor burning on water. Why did she have to come into his life?

Why did she have to be his final destination, his fate? Why was he tortured by a longing which drained him of life's spirit whenever he thought of the possibility of having to live without her? He was an irritable male with rough hair and a gruff voice. A beast. And she? A creation of the mind, mild-mannered. As she bent over with eyes closed in front of the *vrindavana*, her hair, still wet after the bath of the fifth day of menstruation, was spread all over her body. Tiny lamps in front. There was a nip in the dawn air. He told her a story he had read while he was a secondary school student. 'There was once a princess, the most beautiful girl in the world. She was under a strange curse and so went to sleep as soon as she was born. A long sleep during which she stayed a virgin. Years passed and one day a young man came on horseback to touch her and wake her up. . .' He was the hero of all the stories he read and Sharada the heroine. 'And so? Sounds like a riddle,' she had said. He had laughed. She had brushed aside the hair on her eye and stood up holding a *champaka* flower which had adorned the *tulasi*, in her hand. The sun had then covered her body in ornaments made of gold and he had been lost for words.

'Sorry. Tell me, are you alright? I'm the same as I was four years ago.'

She was covered in perspiration as she pressed her forehead to Gowri's warm underside. Was she not happy that Ranga had not got married? Her fingers trembled as they tugged at Gowri's udders. As Ranga's *dhoti* grazed her back, she felt warm all over, head to toe. Ranga looked at her sternly as she sat there, an ash-covered ember. The *pallu* slipped from her shoulder and he could see the thumb-sized birthmark on her neck. The slender frame of a girl he knew so well. Sharda too was like any other female. Intestines, womb, liver and uterus—she had them all. It was nothing but illusion that she was a creation of the mind. Had they not grown up together since childhood? He had seen her body

without a stitch on it when they were both very young. He had exchanged blows with her too. May be, she had no desire for him because he was all too familiar to her. She was neither like a sister nor a girl he had desired. What was he to her? There was no other girl he wanted as badly as he wanted her. She had haunted him in this manner ever since she had grown up. She was willing to have them sit together, reading Bharatha, crying, sighing, counting the white birds in flight, gathering *ranja* blooms. Nothing else. Why not?

Once, as Sharada was busy gathering flowers, he had, after spotting a cowherd in the arms of a girl on the sands of the Tunga, pulled her close to him and teased her. She had cried and left him with the feeling that he was a reprobate always hankering after a woman's body. That was the beginning of an unreal life for him obsessed with thoughts of perfection. Lascivious thoughts about Sharada all through the night and a hangdog expression through the day because of a sense of guilt. He had read in a book that masturbation was a vile act, felt ashamed and worried about the black rings that he thought were forming under his eyes. He followed the instructions in the book, munched *tulasi* leaves, drank cow's urine and stood on his head. He slept with his feet resting on a couple of cases, one on top of the other, and spent the night chanting 'Jai Hanuman.' Inspite of everything, his semen did not rise towards the heavens and his face did not shine. How false everything was, and added to it, doing things for the sake of appearances! Caressing his hair, Sharada used to say, 'We can stay like this for ever without having to marry, can't we?' It was then she that had spoken to him of Akka Mahadevi, Prabhudeva, Sharadamani and Paramahamsa and waxed eloquent about the ideals that moved them. He had nodded his head when she said, 'I'll spend my life looking after my blind uncle who brought me up. And I would have you return, a great saint.' His ideals melted away as Sharada's body filled up. His experience was no different

from that of every idealistic Indian youth. He consoled himself saying that there was nothing odd about his longings. What was at fault was the unnatural social setup. Damn every spiritual questioning that turns one away from life, he decided one day as he was leaving the place four years ago, and spoke at length to Sharada:

'Look Sharada, all these ideals are not only unnatural but they also make us cruel. If your father hadn't run away, if you hadn't been brought up by this blind Shankariah and if his family and mine hadn't taken the vow they did, you wouldn't have spoken in this manner. It's when we can't do anything that we turn to philosophising, Sharada. Deceiving oneself is more heinous than deceiving others. Your pride isn't letting you accept that our situation has gone beyond our control. And hence, all this philosophical talk. Aren't I right? I won't allow myself any longer to be taken in by such lies from you. Give up your entire past and come with me. Your uncle and this family—they are your past. And I, your future. Either come with me or stay here, tied to the past, and rot. . .'

He wrote to her as soon as he reached Mysore.

'Our youth is not there to spend in nursing a man in his old age. You have to live for yourself; and for me too. Otherwise, at the end of it all, your life will appear to be barren, colourless. If you were to reject the body's desires and live without them, you will end up a peevish old woman, a ghost out to squeeze the life of young girls. It's against nature. No flower should attempt to bloom beyond its petals. I know the plight of girls who resolutely turn their faces against marriage. I see them here everyday. Some of them end up developing a passionate attachment to other girls on the threshold of youth. It is a vile game they play. Unnatural sex. They are better than others who end up as misanthropes. Their only mission in life seems to be to hate licentious men. You shouldn't turn out to be such a woman, Sharada. Don't dry up.'

Ranga's words had appeared to Sharada like some aberration of the mind. He was torturing her with wisdom gleaned from strange books that he had come across in the city. He would have been content with the village had he not gone to Mysore for studies; happy caring for the things that had traditionally come down to him. The city had put strange ideas into his head. She could have married him had he agreed to live on in the village. Everything would have been fine. She could have looked after Maviah. No such luck—Ranga wanted to have his way in everything. Even when he was in love, what mattered was his pride in being able to say, 'See, how much I love you!' Why did he have to come back now? Why did he have to be so insensitive in his talk? As she crouched and milked the cow, Sharada was apprehensive about what awaited her.

'Eh, what's this, a scar on your elbow? Did you have a fall?'

As the question seared her, her hand moved and a jet of milk hit the ground. She flung the *pallu* which had come loose over her shoulders. God, how his one word of concern had put her mind at ease! No, she could not live away from him. 'Maviah, tell me what I should do. God, show me the way,' she found herself asking silently. 'I've brought this necklace of black beads for you, Sharada. I'm sure it becomes you.' Ranga lifted the bud-like flame of the lantern to her face as he spoke. How tender and soft-spoken he could be at times! She caressed Gowri's body as the cow sighed in relief that its udders were no longer heavy with milk, covered the container with her *pallu* and stood up.

'Kowli is with calf. She hasn't come back,' Sharada said and went out of the shed, calling loudly for the cow. Ranga heard her as she added, 'The tiger has been a problem recently,' and he said, 'Let's go looking for her after we have eaten, I'll go with you.' Sharada agreed.

* * *

Ranga saw Lacchi sitting in the hall and greeted her. She got up as she asked, 'When did you come, Rangiah?' and added, 'I came here to meet you. It has been years, hasn't it?' 'I'm sorry your mother died. I heard about it. I also heard that you got married,' Ranga said and asked, 'How's your husband? Any children?' 'Why don't you visit me in my place?' Lachi asked. 'He goes away to the fields in the morning.' She blushed as she added, 'I'm all alone in the house.' She inclined her head to one side, opened her shapely mouth a bit and stood there looking at him, 'No, Lacchi, no,' Ranga whispered so that Shankariah would not hear. 'Not anymore. I came here to find out if Sharada will marry me. You are a good sort, Lacchi.' The girl looked at him coquettishly and smiled as she said, 'Come off it! I'm nobody. It's my desire too to see you happily married. Do something, if you will, for mother's sake. Talk to Doddiah and get him to transfer the rights over the orchard to us. I'll bless you.' 'Let me see,' Ranga said.

Lacchi was a fine girl. Very fine indeed, olive-complexioned, straight-nosed, round-hipped and soft, oh, how soft, all over. As she walked through the orchard with a bunch of bananas, one felt like exclaiming in pleasure at the sight of her. She did not walk, she skipped and leaped. Uninhibited laughter. Words and gestures dripping with sweetness. Her hands and body, playful in a myriad ways. One felt at ease in her presence, convinced that it was no sin to be happy. Her beauty was such that one felt that there was nothing in the act of making love which was either disgusting or taboo. She offered herself so generously that one was sure that she could belong to no one else. Hers was a soothing presence. There was no post-coital nausea, none whatsoever. She was a genuine and complete female, one hundred percent. Not like Sharada at all. One would not feel that Sharada was naked even if there was no stitch on her. She would look like an animal about to be sacrificed. Lacchi

appeared nude even when she had clothes on. God had created one of them as one's soulmate for the daytime and the other for the pleasures of the night. One could not have both of them at the same time. Ranga had thought that all women were the same once they got out of their clothes. He had never bared himself totally. Some day, he should bare himself. . . He had tried but had failed to stand utterly naked. . . It would be foolish on his part to demand of Sharada the pleasure that Lacchi gave him. Lacchi was the type that desired to spread happiness around. One day, while he was bathing, she had come in and he was embarrassed that she had seen him in that state. And the very next day, she had offered to put oil on his head and give him a bath because he had said that his eyes were burning. She had massaged his feet, had opened her mouth, asked for the betel juice in his mouth and said that she was his spittle. She was indeed a divine damsel, like Urvashi, beyond all questions of morality. An unsullied girl, her company was like the fragrance of the earth after the rains in *Shravana*. He would be in a state of beatitude when he was with her. . . Life's ultimate goal was such a state, wasn't it? It was tough to be in a state of perpetual tension. But why did he strive to reach for such a state through Sharada? He was deluding himself, wanting the same couch to serve both the soul and the body. Sages took on animal forms for sex, didn't they? Neither total physical pleasure nor gratification of the soul was possible for the human body.

A vague restlessness. A kind of ennui. . .

He went out of the hall into the yard. The moonlight was soothing as it gently etched the shapes of the woods and hills. Ranga lit a cigarette.

Why was he against the idea of living in the village? Why was he squirming like a worm?

'See you soon,' Lacchi said and went away.

* * *

All through the bus ride from Mysore to the village, Ranga had been thinking of what he would say to Sharada. His life had seemed to have come to a halt somewhere between the two places. When he left Koppalu four years ago, he had angrily told Sharada, 'I won't set my eyes on you ever again.' But he had not been able to shake her off from his thoughts. An inner need, well beyond his volition, desires and plans, was shaping his life. One's unalterable nature determined one's lot in life and what had to happen was inevitable, he had told himself and waited. Having determined to achieve things irrespective of Sharada not being with him, he had tried his hand at various things like playing on the veena, painting and writing poetry. He did achieve a passable measure of competence, nothing beyond it. Having decided that one's ultimate goal should be a life of commitment to values, he spent some time practising honesty in everyday affairs. Convinced that he was a saint worthy of worship, he moved about stiff-necked, vain in his assumed modesty. Clad in *jubba* and tucked-in *dhoti*, he looked into himself to discover that he was hollow within. Instead of responding to life in a tender and unschooled fashion, his body vulnerable to the onslaught of life's experiences, had turned him into a rough and unfeeling sort. He started wondering whether his pursuit of a life of ideals was anything more than his wanting to be considered great, an exercise in exaggerated self-esteem. This vanity of the spirit was nothing but the other face of the vanity that one sees in any filthy bourgeois society. It would be infinitely better, he decided, to be a man prone to anger, lust, love and hatred. He discarded in disgust all his ideals as if they were old clothes. He was being reduced to an impotent man, his error being the attention he gave to the words of a book-loving, life-fearing girl like Sharada. He decided to live again. But what was it 'to live?' That too was just an expression, a fresh ideal, wasn't it?

'All ideals are born out of vanity—a sense of self-importance,' he argued. There's nothing greater than life—one should be open to any and every experience. It's necessary to have a clear idea of one's limitations. It's only then that one will be able to assess the possibilities that life offers. The soul isn't any more precious than the body's desires. Everything begins and ends with the body. All yearnings, both physical and metaphysical, should be realised here. Any experience which does not involve the senses is nothing but mental prostitution. Life is the wound that nature left between the thighs of a woman and the burning torch in a man's middle. Why don't we accept this simple truth? Why do we feel ashamed about it? Maya, Nirvana—isn't it better to accept the joys and sorrows that life offers in a thanksgiving spirit than wanting to be free of life's bonds? Adam tried to hide his shame behind a fig-leaf, it seems. Siddhartha deluded himself thinking that he lost his shame under the *Bodhivriksha*, it seems. Nothing but self-delusion. Nature, with its fortnights of moonlight and darkness, is like a woman who menstruates once a month. The ultimate goal behind it all is creation.'

Philosophical speculations while seated in a hotel in the presence of inexperienced students from a hostel. Gopal had cut in.

'Words. Mere words. What's this? You are talking of everyone's inevitable business of living as if it's some kind of an ideal. Tell me the name of the book you are reading at the moment. Lawrence, by any chance, or Freud? Instead of wasting time on such books, why don't you visit the maternity hospital? You will come to realise that all Indians are living up to your ideal every night in a committed way. I'm sure you will loose some of your arrogance if you were to look at the pregnant women lining up with bottles of medicine in their hands. . .'

A teenager on a bicycle, sporting a multi-coloured bush-shirt, rode dangerously close to a girl, braked suddenly and

said sorry. The girl smiled to herself as he rode away. Gopi pointed his finger in that direction and said.

'See that? There's your ideal. Did you have to study books to glean the wisdom that our roadside Romeos learn on their own?'

Gopi was a jolly fellow, a cynic. There was an element of truth in what he said. A certain unthinking callousness too. Ranga did not get into an argument with him. He knew that there was something unnatural in what he had said. One must love, live, cherish ideals, should emulate this one or do things like that one—every one of them was the statement of an ideal, wasn't it? Ranga felt that he was utterly inexperienced. Though Gopi's words that all his wisdom had come from books was an exaggeration, it was indeed true that there was something unnatural about the way he lived. Having missed out on the critical stages that come inevitably in any man's life, he lived in a world of abstractions. Little experience but an outsized head. Only those operations like excretion, hunger and the burdensome youth which left him with a feeling of incompleteness as he tossed about in the bed alone, were the genuine ones—they made urgent demands on him. Using ones' genius was perhaps an inevitable operation like excretion or ejaculation to those great ones for whom mere family was not enough. Why should a crow set its wings on fire to outdo the peacock? Gopi was right—he, Ranga, was indeed a Don Quixote—but better than Gopi as a human being. He was not a cynic.

Jettisoning all his ideas, Ranga, like any inexperienced youth around, took to drinking beer and, summoning enough courage one night, even visited a prostitute's house. Lacchi, who desired to give him pleasure, was so much better. His heart was heavy with a sense of having been let down. Was that all that there was to sex? A moment's thrill, so ordinary as an experience? Did nature weave such a colourful net of worldly ties round that little

thrill in order to ensare man? He thought often of Gopi's words. Pregnant women standing in a queue with bottles of medicine in their hands. And men behind them with a hang-dog expression as if they had done something bad. Schopenhauer was right. No, no. He could not hope for anything better even from Sharada. He lost his zest for living and felt that he had been taken for a ride. There was some sense perhaps in Sharada's question as to why she should desert her uncle for the sake of such fleeting happiness? He was not sure, whether she would not regret leaving behind things if she made her life with him; on whether the bond of love between them would be strong enough to make her feel that what she had left behind was of no consequence. Everything would turn out to be mechanical. Why should he snatch her away from her uncle for the sake of a brief sexual act of four or five minutes, which was sure to leave behind a sense of shame when it was over and he put on his clothes and switched on the lights? Anyway, he would not bare himself totally. Nor would Sharada. Lacchi could, quite naturally. Not they.

Nothing was of any significance. Like going round in a circle. Neither joyous nor meaningful. He dreamt that he was a man who had been felled by a stroke, sitting on the edge of a cavern, while a girl with red flowers in her hair walked to and fro below. He sat there petrified, afraid he would loose his balance and fall. Another of his dreams was about the girl losing the ring he had given and of his forgetting everything as a result. Strange fears when he was alone. He would suddenly wake up from sleep and feel anxious. His legs would feel weak and he would flare up for no reason whenever his mother talked to him. Caught in the grip of a strange inertia, he felt afraid without any apparent reason.

. . . Why did he come back to the village then? What wheel of karma was it that had trapped him? He could not make any sense of it. The smells of Malenad were all around

him—the smell of the plants and animals; of the earth, wet and soft like a woman recently delivered of a child; of the cattle; of the pigeons cooing from the nests in the roof and of the wheat stored in the granary. . . Sun on the hair, wet after a wash, loose on the back. Brushing off a strand of hair which fell over the eye, she got up with the *prasad* in hand. That was when the sun covered her body with many a jewel. . . Red, red flowers all over the *muttuqa* tree, ever a virgin even after repeatedly giving birth. Lifting its eyes from the water which had been used to wash rice, the cow looked at him vacantly. . . Tiny, tiny feet and tiny kites in the air. He was getting to be blind to the beauty of all the things around. He was jaded, growing old as he approached the age of thirty.

'Oh, God,' he exclaimed involuntarily as he stood in the moonlight. Birds and animals had no freedom of choice. Why should man aspire to it? Freedom was an illusion. . .

He looked at Shankariah who was telling the beads of the necklace he used in prayer.

* * *

'Eh, Sharada, ask Ranga to pay the penalty to Tirupathi if he intends to have his food here. Didn't you say that Kowli hasn't come home? She's heavy with calf. Ask Lacchi's husband to go look for it. Last night I dreamt that your pregnant sister let out a scream in pain and I woke up with a start. A tiger roared right in front of the house and left. Take the consecrated plank of wood and leave it in the cowshed. It's all my misfortune and I can't do anything but pull my hair. Eh, Ranga. . . Ranga. . .'

'What?'

'What have you decided? Tell me.'

Ranga sat down. He could not immediately think of anything to say.

'It's for you elders to decide, isn't it?'

'We have gone over it in the past. Look, your ancestors and mine wouldn't approve of this relationship.

'None of them is alive now.'

'Being an educated man, you may not agree to what I say. There is more to marriage than the happiness of a man and a woman. It's also a way of clearing the debt we owe our ancestors. Your offspring should prove to be worthy of offering them *pinda*, remember. The bonds we forge in life for our happiness are purely in terms of our own karma. I remember what Appiah told me. Shankara, he told me, man's life isn't free. Only an *avadhootha* who has totally rejected this world and has even performed the last rites for himself is free in the real sense. Not the likes of you and me.'

'I don't understand your words, Shankariah. Please listen to me. I know you are old and blind. You have brought up Sharada. She says she can't live away from you. That's fine by me. You come and stay with us.'

Ranga wiped the sweat off his forehead and asked God to give him strength to come out with what he had to say. He had suffered enough at the hands of the old man. His face looked ugly.

'How can you suggest such a thing, Ranga? I have grown up in this house. It's a part of my body. The income from the areca plantation in front of this house was willed by our ancestors to be used to conduct pujas in the Eeshwara temple. You are asking me to ignore our ancestors' wishes, leave this house and live with you. God wouldn't approve, I'm sure, if I were to forget their injunctions against my taking food or water in your house.'

Ranga could stand no more. He felt nauseated by the old man's words. Shankariah's grief was a put-on spectacle, nothing but the disgusting peevishness of an individual who failed to come to terms with his own lot. A dying tiger was known to leave its herd and die alone. Not Shankairiah. . .

'Who can say anything about what God approves or not, Shankariah? Sharada's widowed sister got pregnant and killed herself. And you want Sharada to stay single and die attending to your needs. Tell me, is this too God's will?'

Shankariah felt hurt that Ranga's words were those of a heartless butcher. What was wrong with what he said? Shankariah's mother had told him on her deathbed: 'You decided not to marry because you were born blind. Parvathi ended up here as a widow. Her father left home and Sharada has come under your care. She is the sole sprout that is left on the family tree. Find her a good husband and see that our line doesn't end with her.' He had not carried out his mother's wish. Sharada was already twenty-five. His mother had been married off when she was only ten years old. Something had gone wrong. Somewhere. When he asked Sharada to arrange a display of toys on the occasion of *Navaratri*, she spoke as if she had renounced the world, saying that there was no one to see it. She said no when he suggested she should have an oil bath and added that Lacchi was there to help him. Something was wrong. May be, it was his mistake. Ranga was there in front, like a big question mark. If only he had not been born blind . . . Surely, he was not to blame for that. May be, it was his mistake that he had survived when nature's remorseless order was that only the strong should survive. Ranga was the big problem. He was his nemesis, perhaps. Blinded by his youth, he was questioning the old man's right to be a burden on others. He was blind. So was Ranga and nature too. In the eyes of nature, Ranga, any animal or bird, stone or sand, or he were all the same. God granted man a sense of justice and wisdom that He denied nature. He asked man to walk on the razor's edge contemplating happiness and questioning right and wrong, while the world around was indifferent to any distinction between them. Why did not God pose him this question when he was still in command of his body? It was

all a matter of one's luck. If man did not have any discrimination at all in ethical matters, nature would have turned out to be wholly cruel. . . He would have asked his father for advice, if only he were alive at that moment. His father had once talked to him on the topic of love. A bitch, in an upsurge of love for her puppies, starts licking their tender bodies. As the licking goes on with her rough tongue the puppy's skin is peeled off and the bitch tastes blood. She ends up eating her own young. Five puppies one day and only four the day after. Poor mother and poor poor puppies, still to open their eyes! A case of excessive love binding one with the result that creatures born of a mother end up being consumed by her! He remembered his father emphasising the words, 'her own young' and defining 'love' in those terms. All love was a mistake and it was his mistake that he loved Sharada. But how could he carry on without loving? What else was there in nature to fall back on? *'Kalah kreedathi qacchatyayuh tadapi na muncchatyashavayuh*,' Father was fond of quoting that line, always accompanying it with laughter. He would say that Shankara too should keep laughing. . .

'Nothing wrong with what you are saying, Ranga. My desire is that she should marry a boy who is willing to live here and bear children. Let's us put that question aside. Why don't you attend to developing your orchard in this place and. . .'

Ranga cut him short.

'I won't hear of it. In my view, this village is like a curse. I want to live. But not here. Sharada too shouldn't stay here. I don't want a marriage which insists on her staying here. This village and the familiar house here may be dear to you like your own life. For me, this place is my graveyard.'

'What on earth can I do if you are this adamant, Ranga? I had thought that, perhaps, the injunctions of our ancestors may not apply in this case as Sharada is my sister's daughter. I had even decided to pay the penalty to God and let her

marry you, if that's what you desire. And here you are, insisting that the horse under you has only three legs. You are blinded by your youth. No fault of yours. You want to deprive me of the only crutch I have in my life and kill me. Tell me, does your conscience let you do such a thing?'

Ranga stood with his head bent. He had no reply to that question and so went into the kitchen, wanting to see Sharada. Ready to serve food, she had laid the leaves. She seemed to be in a trance as she stood leaning against the pillar with the churning staff in her hands. Suddenly, a thought flashed across Ranga's mind. Lacchi was the daughter of Malerara Putti, who was Shankariah's concubine. The whole village knew of the affair. Sharada was his adopted daughter while Lacchi was his flesh and blood. Why should Shankariah, who swore such unswerving loyalty to the past and his ancestors' wishes, not think of his responsibility by his own daughter? He should question the old man about it. He made up his mind to face Shankariah and left the kitchen. 'Listen to me, please,' Sharada pleaded. Watching him blanch, she added, 'You mustn't say anything to hurt Maviah.' Ranga swallowed the words that had rushed to the tip of his tongue. Why should he raise a question which did not seem to have bothered Shankariah's conscience? He had come to the village to solve his own problems.

After attending to Shankariah's *palahara*, Sharada served him rice.

* * *

'Did you ask Lacchi's husband to go and bring Kowli back, Sharada? She is so close to calving. Might have even given birth somewhere up the hill. A tiger has entered the forest here, I'm told. What a nuisance! A wounded one, Koraga said. I heard it roar right in front of our house last night. I have prayed to God Ganapathi and promised him a gift of fruit. Our house is accursed, I think. I had asked

Koraga to plant a hundred areca saplings and the fellow is not to be seen anywhere. Whoever listens to a blind old man? I don't even know whether Tippabhatta is performing the daily *puja* at the Eeshwara temple. May be, while I'm alive, someone will continue to put some water and flowers over God's head. Who knows what will happen after my death? I'm a sinner, born to drive our ancestors into hell.'

Ranga could not enjoy his food. Every word spoken went into him like a barb. And there was Sharada, confused, helpless. The old man's love for her was destroying her. Why was she indifferent to his declaration of love? Was she not fed up with living in that place? She kept her silence even though she was being mentally tortured.

After washing, Ranga came into the hall and was startled at the sight of Shankariah who sat there telling beads. He caught his breath.

With beads in his hands and a blanket around him, Shankariah sat there while his shadow stretched in the light of the oil lamp to cover the length of the hall. It was not just a shadow, but the past taking that form. Unclear, shrinking and dancing when the flame dipped. A curse that had come down from the days of his father, grandfather and great grandfather to enter his life, a past that would haunt his future. A shadow that fell between him and Sharada, it would pursue them relentlessly. He remembered the night he had run into the place as a little boy and been frightened seeing Shankariah's shadow. He had even dreamt about a world without human beings, with only shadows moving all around. That was the time when he was scared of his own shadow. Things had not changed all that much since then and he was still afraid of his own shadow. It came into his life at birth and would leave only when he died. No, not even then. Shadows knew no death. Parvathi's shadow was still very much there. The shadows of the ancestors who had sworn in the name of God were still there. What he saw was the

other one's shadow and what the other one saw was his shadow. Shadows coming near and then moving away. Neither the other one nor he had seen each other. All that they saw were shadows. The centuries-old roof over their heads was like a curse and over and above it the clouds from which rain leaked non-stop. Fat pillars and beams supporting both the roof and the clouds. Shadows etched all over the house by the lamps, the mouldy idol of Ganapathi with its damaged trunk, the chest in the corner, the wall-clock measuring time in an unhurried manner, a blind man who refused to die, his long shadow, a cat on its soft stealthy feet making its way through the hall, its mewing being the only sound breaking the enveloping silence of the house, the kitchen with the musty smell of old curds—everything was like an evil force, symbolising death, a curse of many births ago which was out to break his will. Nothing was ever forgotten there. The house was like a dozing memory, an immobile python, and moss-covered, it looked dull and faded. All beautiful things would be destroyed—the fragrance of flowers and the fleeting colours of the evening. It was an eyeless demon, Ahalya turned into stone. Things should die and be destroyed once their usefulness was past. Such an order would be good, beautiful. Mere survival with one hanging on to life was evil. The forest grew around and the beautiful one slept on. Sharada was the condemned virgin in his life. He would save her, come what may. Let her place her hand in his and together, they would die and be reborn each new day.

As Shankariah sat there with the blanket over him, purposelessly blinking his sightless eyes in the surrounding darkness, the clock struck seven. Marking each strike with a movement of his head, Shankariah said, 'Ah, it's seven o' clock.' A strange noise escaped from his nose and throat. He held his eyelids closed tight and tracked the wrinkles round his eyes. 'Amma, Rama, Krishna,' he exclaimed as he yawned and went back to the purposeless act of batting his eyelids

in the dark. And the clock went back to its registering the fruitlessness of generations. There was something unnatural about the way Ranga turned to the idol Ganapathi with its damaged trunk. There was a look of tender concern in his eyes as he sighed watching Sharada come into the hall with heavy feet. Shankariah started talking to himself:

'I can't expect the young ones of the day to listen to me, can I? Why should they bother about the old ones as they stand on the threshold of youth? Well, this is nature's law. Wasn't it Yayathi who told his son: Look, son, I gave you life. Lend me your youth for a few days. What do you think the son did? He replied: No, sir, each one of us has his own life to live. Sorry. He wasn't wrong in rejecting his father's request. Appiah used to tell me after reading *Shakunthala:* Shankara, did you get it, the beauty of the way that Kanva sent off his adopted daughter? He couldn't escape from feelings of love even though he had eschewed all attachments. He bade her farewell with tears in his eyes and that was great. . . Everyone of us is alone in the end. The infant cries as it comes out of the mother's womb, alone. And man is all alone at the moment of death. It seems that there was only a dog to go with Dharmaraya, the world's ruler, at the end. He refused to go without the dog. A great soul. One's honour is greater than one's happiness. We should never give up our dharma. It is for happiness that one depends on another human being. But everyone of us is condemned to be alone at the end, leaving behind everything. It seems that a ghost wanders restlessly if his desires remain unfulfilled. . . Who's that? Sharada? Come here, girl. Did you hear the tiger roar in the night right in front of our place? Some impurity or other must have touched Lord Ganapathi. We must ask Bhatta to perform the act of purification. Did he offer gifts to the deity. . .? You must be bored stiff listening to me saying the same thing over and over again. I am a peevish old man. All old ones are the same. Don't feel

obliged to do what I say. Throw me out and go your way. I'll ask Tippabhatta to give me one meal a day. Lacchi will look after me at other times.'

Ranga could not stand Sharada's sobbing. He went out and called Sharada. 'Come here, Sharada, There's something I want to say to you.' A net was being spread once again, though not with malice aforethought. All that talk of right and wrong, of sacrifice, it was nothing but an unconscious attempt to cheat others. If the old man really meant all that he said, he should die, but he wouldn't. He lacked both the courage and the generosity which such an act demanded. If he had forced Sharada to spend her life looking after him, she would have had the courage to confront him, fight him. The old man's way of torturing her, talking in that manner, was downright evil. Not that he had planned it all. Nonetheless, it was evil. He must be gloating over his own generosity. He must be nodding his head with a feeling of supreme contentment as if his conscience had been cleansed by his talk. All his generosity was mostly imagined and of the verbal kind. How could he make Sharada understand it? How could he make it clear to her that Shankariah was belittling Ranga's love for her by holding it against his righteous-sounding generosity and enjoying himself by torturing her? The old man loved life. His talk of tradition was born out of habit. It wasn't something he really believed in. Would he be able to put it across to Sharada in such a way that she would understand it? 'Sharada, come here a minute,' he called again. He was losing the fight, he thought. Even if Shankariah asked her to go and get married to Ranga, she would not act. The old man, so unwilling to die, was presenting himself as a noble sort so that Ranga would look small in comparison. Sharada would find the burning desire in Ranga's groins nauseating in the light of her blind old man's moral principles. She would dismiss his desire as an ephemeral one, just a flicker, while the old man's

appeared to be an expression of everlasting dharma. Sharada would never be his totally, even if they got married. Shankariah would be a love-demanding ghost haunting them even after death. Oh, God, would he ever be free from it! 'Sharada, come here,' he called out again as she stood there crying. 'Go, girl, go. He's calling. Go,' said Shankariah. Ranga was shaken by the voice and the halting words. What was there behind the faint voice? Did the old man really and whole heartedly. . . ? What feeling did the words intend to convey? Was there any basis at all for what Ranga had imagined to be the old man's motives? He felt like fleeing the place. Everything seemed to have gone out of his control. Was his need for Sharada as great as Shankariah's? He felt disgusted that his thoughts were running wild. There, there was the old man, smug and contented. Hurrah, old man! He transformed himself into Kanva by saying, 'Go, girl, go.' 'Sharada. it's getting late,' he called out. He stamped his foot on a moving ant and killed it. 'Let it die!' he muttered.

* * *

Koraga fell at Shankariah's feet. It was obvious that he had been drinking and Shankariah cursed him. 'Master, you should save me. My daughter, Nanji, has run away with Siddha. I wanted him to give me at least fifty rupees as bride price. He swore at me, pointed his gun at me and shooed me off. Byra had promised fifty rupees for Nanji's hand. But the girl was bent on marrying Siddha. . .' Koraga had tears in his eyes.

'What can I do about it?' Shankariah asked. 'Forget about the bride price,' he advised.

'My only daughter, and she had to do this to me,' Koraga moaned. 'Can you imagine how I feel? Siddha works for Narasappa. Please talk to him and see that I get the bride price,' he pleaded.

'All right. Why have you been spending your time drinking instead of planting the areca saplings?' Shankariah expressed his annoyance.

Koraga came out and greeted Ranga. 'Don't go out in the night, master. There's a tiger.' He walked away and one could hear his drunken singing before he had gone a few steps. Ranga thought that Koraga was in high spirits.

* * *

'Kowli is heavy with calf. I'm afraid the tiger may get it,' Sharada said and Ranga offered to go with her and look for the cow. 'Might have even dropped the calf somewhere on the hill.' Ranga said, 'You may be right, Sharada. Pregnant cows normally don't go missing like this. They are known to return to the shed by evening. By the way, did you hear what Koraga had to say? This is not the first time that Nanji has left home in this manner. Wait and see, father and daughter are sure to get together again. It's a daily routine in their house.' Ranga was worried. It would be a nuisance if the cow had dropped her calf on the hill. There was the talk of the tiger besides. Was there indeed a tiger in the area? Having nothing better to do, the village folk were known to think obsessively about tigers. Ranga had seen tigers only in a zoo. The cattle were said to be able to detect the presence of a tiger by smell. Koraga was known to be marksman who never missed getting a tiger.

'We'll be in a quandary if the cow has dropped the calf, Sharada. We can neither stay there nor come back here.' Ranga remembered having seen cows which called out for bulls to mount them long after they had stopped yielding milk. At such times, they tug at the ropes. Their bellowing was a strange cry which came from a mixture of longing, pain and urgency. 'Calling a bull,' people would say. Frogs, birds and buffaloes—they all gave out the mating call. Not man, though. the body exuded a kind of scent at such times, he had heard. But man,

the superior creature, needed a special kind of expression. For example, he himself would launch into a speech if he wished to say that he wanted Sharada. Would not say it in a single croaking like the frog's. A violinist contorted his face while expressing love through the notes he produced. A man in the throes of love would half-close his eyes and exclaim while the frog would just croak. He would face Shankariah's talk on the finer points of morality with a talk on the finer points about the body's vital organs. He could never express his need for Sharada like the cow, like the frog, and convey his anguish, desire and urgency. Unnecessary complications and grave problems for man, the highest form in all creation. What would it have been like if he were a male frog and Sharada a female of the species? He would have croaked from the muddied waters of a Malenad pond and she wold have come hopping. He was sure a frog would have called him a fool, watching the way he courted Sharada.

'Kowli was born of Kaveri, wasn't she? Ranga asked.

Sharada nodded her head.

A cool breeze blew from the Kole-hu tank.' 'Is Kaveri still alive?'

'No. She died last year. She went out of the shed one day and didn't come back. Koraga said he had come across her horns in the forest. She was old and a tiger might have got her.'

Kaveri was very protective about Kowli—one could not go near Kowli when she was still a calf without Kaveri coming to butt one. The state of affairs changed once Kowli was about four or five months old. Her mother seemed to forget about her completely. Animals were any day better than the humans. The only ideal was the earth, not the sky. A cow loved her calf as long as she was needed. Once the young one was able to stand on its own feet, the mother let her go and forgot her. An animal would not mock the young one by saying that she carried it for nine months. Nor would she torture it, harping

on her own generosity in having granted freedom to the offspring. No questions of having to pay penalty and no arguments about right or wrong. Damn mankind!

Sharada had not spoken. 'Come on, jasmine, come on, *sampige* and you, *sevantige*, tell me, which one is better, Shankariah or Kaveri? What's your answer? Who is better, Shankariah or Koraga? That's the second question. Who is better, the frog or I? Don't commit any mistake in answering. If you like, go ahead and compare anyone with anyone else.'

They crossed the fields without talking. Opposite their hut, on the mound next to the Kole-hu tank, Lacchi was burning some firewood, getting water ready for her husband's bath. With just the loin cloth on him, he was sitting in front of the fire warming his hands. Lacchi was rubbing oil on his back, while her husband, his dark skin shining in the light of the fire, was singing a song in his gruff voice. Ranga stopped for a minute and listened to the song . . . He felt he had a revelation. One of them, a daughter born of one's own flesh and blood and the other, a foster child. Animal and man of this earth—the former with a blind soul and the latter with a blind body. He placed his hand on Sharada's shoulder with a good deal of trepidation. She did not protest. They stopped under a mango tree. 'Do you still get cramps in your stomach when you have your periods?' he asked and Sharada blushed. She did lift her head when he asked, 'Do you ever laugh?' He persisted: 'Come on, girl, enough of this cry-baby face. Look at me.' Sharada looked up. Ranga recited in a mocking tone, '*Ya kundendu tusharaharadhaval, ya shubhravastranvita*,' She recalled what had happened before and said, 'Stop it.' 'Ha, that's my girl.' Ranga said.

How soft were his words! Memories of events long past as if they belonged to the previous day. She had stood with her hand on his head. He was running his hand on her legs, oh, how softly, looking for tiny thorns with his nails. She had felt his breath on her feet. Warm hands. He had told her

the story of the sleeping princess. He had said that she was herself the princess in the story. She had watched him sitting reading one evening. He had appeared utterly alone, sitting with his legs stretched in the sands of the stream. She had felt like hugging him, wanting to console him. Once, when he was still a student studying in high school, he had asked, 'Why don't you wear a petticoat under your saree, like the city girls?' She had blushed. He had asked her to part her hair on one side and told her that the big vermilion mark on her forehead did not become her. She was thrilled, at the same time afraid. They were now under the same mango tree.

'We have to get married, now. Neither of us is free to stay single.'

Marriage. *Aarathi.* Tiny lamps and *jari* sarees taken out of the case. Married women's incessant chatter, as they rushed to and fro in excitement. Was there a girl who did not want such things? Not for her, though. She said, hesitatingly,

'Maviah. . .'

'No more of that, Sharada. Please. We have spoken about it a hundred times. Why shouldn't he come to live with us?'

'Why don't you settle down here and marry me?'

'Don't bring that up. That's the one thing I can't stand. I have told you any number of times. Why should the ghosts of our ancestors haunt us too? Listen to me, this house of yours is not one where anything prospers. It's a graveyard where ghosts thrive. Your uncle too is a ghost. Your sister too, as she killed the child within her womb. There are no children in the house. Perhaps there's a curse on the house that the line shouldn't continue. And you want me to live here!'

'How selfish you are! Looking at everything from your own viewpoint, never thinking of others.'

Leaning against the tree, Ranga looked at Sharada who had spoken angrily.

'Cut out such talk of selfishness and sacrifice. As if only you have the quality of generosity. Is your uncle who is a

parasite not selfish? Didn't he get all the happiness that he wanted from life? Didn't he keep Lacchi's mother Malerara Putti as his companion?'

'Listen to me. You have no right to speak ill of Maviah. His own mother didn't say a word about it. Why should we?'

'I didn't criticise him for it, did I? What he did was the right thing to do. There was nothing wrong in what he did. He chose not to depend upon the fruit of his own love, his daughter, but on you. And that infuriates me. Is Lacchi not his daughter? Let him transfer the ownership of his orchard to her and live here. Why should his Brahminism come in the way of such an arrangement? Did he not forget our hoary tradition when he went to bed with Putty?'

'I asked you not to talk about it.'

'I know. You don't want me to talk about it. I have come here to alert you to the fact that you weren't born to clean up his muck.'

'Stop it, please. Stop it.' Sharada started sobbing. Why did he blow up in this unfeeling manner everytime he talked to her? It was the same always. Sharada was a quaint sort, not knowing what she really desired. There was a chasm between her feelings and her words. May be, he was no different.

'Listen to me, Sharada. . .'

Sharada stood there and said nothing. He caressed her hair and gently lifted up her face.

'I had no respect for my own father. His life's only passion was to make money. I got little out of my mother—she was a peevish woman. I had long ago decided to get married to a girl who was utterly different from her.

Sharada said nothing. Ranga felt that he could not bare his soul. He had had that experience before. He lifted up her hands and pressed them to his face.

'That is what made me choose you as my girl. My life is in pieces now. You should gather all the fragments and make of me a whole man.'

He had said it but felt nauseated when he looked at her blank expression. He wondered why he had to unburden himself to her. He was a fool, wasn't he?

'It was long ago that I took you for my husband in my mind. Why should we, like others, live together for the sake of a few moments?'

Ranga felt like laughing. Her talk was extremely unnatural, he thought. He wanted the same bed to serve the needs of both his soul and his body, didn't he? How unreal was her soul! He spoke roughly.

'Don't give me that stuff from Purandaradasa, Sharada.'

Ranga would never comprehend her. She did not want that kind of happiness in life. Her father must have thought the same. Not able to stand her mother's nagging, he had left apparently on a pilgrimage, never to return. He gave up everything, his land and house. Her sister was like her mother. She got to be a little too friendly with her teacher who came to their house to give tuition. Sharada could not stand her flirting. When the girl got pregnant, the teacher absconded from the village. Her sister went about for a while with a long face saying it was malaria and swallowed *kalale*, quinine and *akka-thanqi* fruit. It was this sex that Ranga thought so highly of, while she was haunted by the bloated body in the well. She did not want happiness from sex, she could live without it. Poor Ranga, she thought and caressed his hair. Poor Ranga!

'Listen, Sharada. Let me be honest. I can't stand this excessive love you have for Shankariah. I want him to die. Remember that it is what life demands of him. My own father's death didn't affect me all that much, though I cried for form's sake. I felt relieved inside that he had died.'

'How can you say such things?'

'Look here, Sharada. There's nothing wrong in the way I think. I might have done certain things because I wanted to know life as it was. For example, the affair with Lacchi. . .'

'I know about it. Let's not talk about it.'

'I wanted to tell you something. Never mind. Your uncle is actually hurting you with his love. There's something evil about that love. He must give up his love, and be willing to die without grumbling about it. That, in my eyes, is the way that life would have it.'

'Enough. Don't go on preaching, please.'

Sharada was not taking in Ranga's words anymore. She was scared. Why was he intent on torturing her like that? What if Maviah died suddenly? Why did Ranga have to come there? He talked of love. If his love were genuine, he would have agreed to get married to her and settle down in the village. He did not honestly desire her happiness. There was no difference between the man who impregnated her sister and Ranga. They were all the same, with filth on their minds. She shook herself free when he tried to place his hand on her shoulder. She was better dead. No one wanted her. Everyone seemed to conspire to put her in trouble. Ranga had to come there, bother her endlessly and snatch away the peace she had known in her life with Maviah. Ranga did not love her. No, he did not love her. Lacchi was good enough for him. He was heartless, downright cruel.

'Sharada, say something. Don't stand there without saying a word.'

'I don't know what to say. I'm so confused.'

'Forget it. It was my mistake that I took you to be a normal woman. Lacchi is much better than you. You have never been in love with me. There's something unnatural about you. Just like your uncle, you too are given to pinning some philosophical junk to every one of your cowardly acts.'

Ranga's throat was going dry.

'Must save you from that filthy old man's hands. . .'

'You are at it again. I told you not to say such things. His love for me is greater than yours. . . '

'All right, then. Spend your days cleaning his muck. . .'

He paused before he added, cruelly, 'Don't torture me anymore, living in this manner. Go. jump in the lake. . .'

Sharada left him. It was so sudden that Ranga was taken aback. He sat down leaning against the mango tree.

* * *

In the yawning silence under the moon, man seemed to be a nonentity and the indifference of the vast spaces of both earth and sky, colossal. He was not a part of that universe, Ranga thought, being a stranger to that kind of beatitude which came from total detachment. Who was he anyway? Ranganatha. The name signified nothing. Nothing had any meaning but life moved on. He, a rogue bull, had no qualms. If it itched, he would rub his body against the bark of a mango tree and feel supremely happy. The desire to go to bed with a woman was also an itch. God, how he had made a song and dance of it! He could hear the carefree birds occasionally flap their wings. He was the only one around who was miserable. Who had asked him to be miserable? The moon-light was unconcerned about him. Anthills of memories sprang up wherever he turned. He was utterly alone. Ever since his birth. He did not get on either with his mother or father. Nor with Sharada. He was neither a free man nor a prisoner held by love. Who was there to listen to his wailing? His cry of pain was like the sound of the fire groaning from inside damp firewood. Each and every thing was like a grain in a heap of sand, unrelated to other grains, discrete, an element of a quotidian and meaningless life. Like Shankariah, he too had love for the self. There was no meaning in anything. Who did he belong to and who would stand by him? Was he clever? He was nothing. Why did he plead with Sharada when they almost had nothing to do with each other? He had thought that discussion would set things right. He was a crazed one, depending upon wisdom gleaned from books. Was there any means by which an individual and the

world around could understand each other? Words invariably failed to reflect one's thoughts. Feeling that words were inadequate, he had come to believe that total communication would result if two bodies met in passion, that he would shed the helplessness and loneliness he felt if he pressed Sharada close to his chest. His search was for a single bed which would serve both the soul and the body. He was a fool. What did he get out of Lacchi or the prostitute? One wiped herself clean with the saree and pinched his cheek, while the other offered a pot of water if he felt like cleaning himself. What was her name? Leela? The whole thing was nauseating. He could not hope for anything more from Sharada, either. There would be a child if he got married in order to forget nature's deceitful ways. 'What a darling child we have! Look at it smile. Knows its dad!' Elated, one could parade one's manhood. What else was there? He did not want anything. He was not a mere instrument to give his mother a grandchild. Everything in life was filthy and disgusting. His mother, past her menopause, was looking forward to using him to meet her unfulfilled sexual needs. And Sharada was mentally unsound, perhaps because of her problems with menstruation. Lodhra, not Lawrence, for her. And for him, a potion to enhance his virility. He recalled the day-dreaming he indulged in on his way home from the high school. He, a hero, would jump into the waters as they swept Sharada away, rescue her and carry her inert body on his shoulders, like the leading man in a movie. A bookworm who had lost his mind, Shakunthala with her mensuration problems, Kanva the blind who had fallen from his asceticism and Dushyantha who forgot that he was a man. A play ending happily with a combination of Lodhra and the Spanish Fly. In his daydream, he would hug the girl he had plucked from the waters and call her his queen. Not knowing what to do with her, he would let her into the waters again and rescue her once more. Shankariah turned into a Kanva by saying, 'Go,

girl, go.' Three cheers to him, the old one. A sweet dish prepared from jackfruit! There was a pregnant woman killed in sacrifice so that the tank would fill with water. Madevaraya would come riding a bare-backed horse. Like Bhagirathi, Sharada too would be offered as sacrifice so that the line would not be broken. Three cheers to him, the old man. A sweet dish prepared from jackfruit! In *Shakunthala*, physical love transformed itself into a transcendental kind of love, while he insisted that transcendental love should take on a physical form and hence become natural. Big words. When Dushyantha met Shakunthala again in the hermitage of Mareecha,

(1) What if her face was covered in pox marks?

(2) What if her hair had gone grey?

. . . the play would have ended as a tragedy, he had said and Gopi had clapped his hands. 'Ranga is sharp, isn't he? Kowli is the deer, Gopi the clown, the ancestors' vow the sage Doorvasa. Isn't he sharp?' All around the forest grew and the most beautiful damsel in the universe went to sleep. Was he indeed the prince? Only a simple-minded boy who had come under the spell of stories, who rode a bare-backed horse, the same one that Madevaraya, the husband rode—in short an idiot. All the ethical questions that Shankariah raised were nothing but an aberration caused by his blindness. If he were not blind, he would be belching in contentment after consuming betel leaves, all the while gently running his hand over his stomach and saying 'Ah, what happiness!' He was doing the same thing even now, wasn't he? The only difference was that his belching was accompanied by grumbling about his bad luck in life. The old man was so fond of the sweet dish made with jackfruit that he would forget everything as soon as he caught its whiff. Everything had its source in the body. Nauseating things and pleasurable ones, like kissing, like plucking at a woman's taut nipple. What about the act of getting into the clothes one had

jettisoned before the act? Even that was pleasing, wasn't it? Pandu gave up his life for it, it seems. Poor Pandu, weren't there boys, fair-skinned and without any hair on their faces, the boys in the hostel asked. They laughed at him saying he would have either a full meal or nothing. No snacks for Ranga even if there was no meal, they said, and called him a fool. All their jokes were in English while they played cards and smoked cigarettes. Words sounded obscene in their mother tongue. They mocked others, the cynics. Weren't cynics those that spoke unpalatable truths, thereby giving rise to fear in others' hearts? They laughed loudly and he joined them. What airs they put on! Nothing was a tragedy. He could have turned every one of his actions into a huge joke. Not having anything else to do, he would repeatedly throw his king and queen into the waters and rescue them every time. He would hold forth on the inherent significance of the act of dropping one's trousers.

'Go on, boys, laugh till you burst.' There was nothing tragic in life, everything was a big joke. 'Got the whiff of the jack-fruit dish, old man? Aren't you a source of thrills?' A resounding belch and loose motion. How could he manage, poor thing, if Sharada weren't there to take him to the toilet twenty times a day? It was a noble thing to sacrifice oneself for others. Surely, she didn't have time to get married. The jackfruit dish was his enemy, no doubt. It was not available in Mysore and so Shankariah wouldn't go with them. Let him die. Let Sharada too die. He, who wished their deaths, too would die, but the moonlight would continue to grin after everything was destroyed. Perhaps, the fellow up there in the sky was capable of experiencing the thrill of ejaculation for hours on end. Not for him the rush job of a few minutes. Forever erect, the banner of his creative urge, sowing his seeds all over—insect, worm, bull, snake and tadpole. Over-sexed, he was amusing himself by offering man the promise of a few seconds' pleasure. The ancient one, deathless: Lakshmivallabha.

The moonlight would continue to grin showing its teeth even after he died—God's semen, white. . .

Ranga gathered some dry leaves, shavings from the bark and twigs and built a fire. He sat on his haunches and tried to think of a huge joke. Some went through the funeral rites of their own deaths, he had heard. The ordeal by fire for him. And for Sharada the ordeal by water. Like her sister, let her jump into the waters. Women were said to have been sacrificed so that the tank would fill with water. They had to be pregnant women. He would push her into the water and pull her out. Over and over again, like a hero in a movie. The ordeal by water for Sharada and for him the ordeal by fire. He tried again to think of something funny. He was the twig there and the other one was Sharada, while the third one was Shankariah. Let everything burn, be destroyed. Go round the fire three times in the wrong direction humming a devil's song. *Enkudeekana, nikkudeekana*. . . go round once, twice, thrice. 'Shall I at least set my lands in order?' Words, mere words. If he had all his words printed neatly and consigned them to the fire, it would be tantamount to his dying and Sharada dying. Shankariah would never die. He must set fire to everything, everything. Shankariah would have no control over his bowels, Sharada would clean up the muck and Ranga would howl. . . Let the tiger's claws pierce Kowli's womb. . . Let everything be destroyed. . . *Ekkudeekana, nikkudeekana*. . . He could forget nothing. A nincompoop came, the princess slept and he rode a bare-backed horse. . . *Ekkudeekana, nikkunee, ekkudee, nikkunee*. . .

* * *

Oh, God, he exclaimed and got up as he heard the tiger's roar at a distance. He looked all around for Sharada. He ran as he thought that she had jumped into the lake.

* * *

The fat twig he had thrown into the fire saying it was Sharada was burning. He laid Sharada on the ground in front of the fire, picked up the burning twig and threw it away. Did she lose her foothold and slip into the waters? Did she deliberately throw herself into the lake? Or, was it his evil thought that had pushed her into it? He was breathing hard as she peeled off her clothes. She was struggling as he jumped in to rescue her. He was relieved that she was not dead. 'Oh, my Sharada. . . Why did you have to do it? Wasn't I there? Did you jump into the waters knowing what you were doing or did you slip?' He was talking incoherently. Who could he turn to for help at that hour in the dark? And there was the tiger roaring somewhere. All his troubles appeared inconsequential in the presence of Sharada's anguish which had driven her to jump into the waters. He rubbed her cold and naked body dry with his towel. He stoked the fire and, warming his hands over it, he massaged her body. Her fist-sized, morsel-big life was in his hands. 'Sharada, please open your eyes. There's the tiger roaring. Let's sleep warmly in each other's arms in the house and leave this place in the morning by bus.' He got out of his wet clothes, hugged her close and ran his hands over her back all the while calling out her name. He hoped that the act of chanting her name while massaging her body would bring her back to life and that she would be his. 'Ganapathi, let her live. I'll give half my life to her, please let her live,' he prayed. Sharada started breathing again and he was relieved. The only thing he wanted was to have her alive and he would be supremely happy cherishing her for ever. He felt great love and experienced a pleasing gentleness in himself for her. 'Let me bear all your troubles. I'm a man,' said his new wisdom. What a rumpus he had created, he thought and felt nauseated. He was ashamed of having asked for her death in the name of the ordeals by fire and water and prayed again for her life. As he heard the tiger's roar from the right flank of the slopes of Navilugudda, he knew that the most

important and necessary thing at that moment was to reach home safely. Did he have to travel all the way to death to learn to love? Oh, life, squirming like a worm! He squeezed Sharada's hair dry and looked at her so softly that he seemed to be offering her his life. No, it wasn't an accident, she had intended to kill herself. Crazy girl, who jumped into the lake on the spur of the moment. She must have felt utterly helpless thinking that there was no one to whom she could turn. Dear girl, dear dear girl—he felt like crying. Laughing. He wanted to lisp like an infant that had just then learnt to make sounds—my child, my love, my life! A thousand words caught in a stampede in his throat. How insignificant, how ordinary, how straw-like everything was in the presence of love! 'Oh, my child,' he said. . . A tiny bird, having saved itself from a wild cat, left the tree to rise in the air, gyrated and screamed with the excitement of being alive. A ripe cumin fruit dripping juice, too heavy for the stalk to hold, fell into the hungry center of the dark earth below. Kowli, who was standing among the bushes licking her calf, scared by the tiger's roar, called out when she saw the fire hoping that some human beings were around. She could not leave the calf and so called out aloud.

The calf, struggling to stand on its legs, was at Kowli's udders. Blood on the earth and the smell of fresh birth and Kowli's ears cocked as the tiger roared in the moonlight. A roar that tied a noose round the forest.

If the tiger were to come there, it might get scared of the fire. Tigers were known to dread fire. Ranga felt like talking loudly.

'Here, Sharada. There the tiger, roaring. Open your eyes, please.' He rubbed her ears gently with his lips as he said, 'Did you hear that, Sharada? Kowli is calling from the bushes over there. Don't die, Sharada. Open your eyes.'

When the forest suddenly fell silent, Kowli who had been scared by the tiger's roar, forgot to eat the afterbirth and cried out. With some difficulty, she bent down to the milk-drinking

calf, and licked the inside of its legs. Ranga lifted Sharada up, placed her on his lap and pressed her close to him. He felt her stomach; she hadn't consumed much water. She must be tired and in pain, he thought. Under a warm blanket, he should hold her close and sleep.

* * *

Her body was warm once again, thanks to the fire and Ranga's embrace. She opened her eyes slowly and held him tight as if she was trying to remember something. She heaved a deep sigh and said, 'Why did you. . . ?' She tightened her arms around him. Ranga started when he heard something move on the leaves.

Please, Sharada, why? Let's not ask the question now. Please.

He kissed her on the lips and stood up.

He called out for Kowli.

* * *

Groping for his necklace of beads which he had removed when he went into the bathroom, Shankariah felt a strange fear and pain. He found the necklace near the chest.

Suddenly, shattering the silence that covered the house, the tiger's roar and then the sound of something rushing into the house.

The clock went on ticking in the silence.

Shankariah's blind eyes blinked vainly in the dark.

Kowli called out from near the shed. 'Appa, amma!' he exclaimed.

As he listened to footsteps that were drawing close after the gate was unlatched, he muttered to himself, 'Narayana, Narayana!'

Translated from the Kannada by
RAMACHANDRA SHARMA

KANUPRIYA

VARSHA DAS

As I was waiting for Kanu near the window I remembered the story of the spider. Everytime it climed up it slipped down, but it did not give up. I wait for him the same way. He may turn up, some day. If the spider's attempts can be called strong will-power, mine is out of weakness. Will-power is not required to stand at the window. It is a strange weak feeling which makes me stand there every evening. Will Kanu come? I can recognise him from far in the midst of milling crowds. I can recognise his fragrance with my eyes shut. That is why my name is Kanupriya, Kanu's beloved.

When Kanu met me last, he held my chin and caressed my lips with his little finger and said:

'I will return as quickly as I can. . . Does my intensity of love need any proof?'

It was not necessary.

I had always believed him. His forthrightness and simplicity came through in his actions and expressions.

Having soaked myself in it from head to toe I had become his beloved.

Then why isn't he returning? He knows that I am waiting for him. My heart is beating fast. My eyes want to see only Kanu, my ears want to hear his voice. I want Kanu's hand in mine. But he won't come, I know it. He has gone beyond the clouds, across the many skies.

Where can I go with this defeated heart? Sleep is my resort. The sky is overcast. A thick layer of dust is floating between the earth and the cloud. It's murky all around.

If it rained, the dust would coalesce with the earth, clouds would disperse. The moon would be visible and so would Kanu's reflection on it. Wouldn't it? When Kanu and his Kanupriya stand in front of the mirror, they would see each other. Kanu and I would plough the wet soil, sow the seed. It would sprout, and have tender leaves, roots and branches, it would keep growing, day after day. It would grow taller than me, taller than Kanu; and Kanu and I would look at it with pride. We would then tell each other: Look at our seed, it has grown into a tree and now kisses the sky, and reveres the earth. It embraces all the directions.

I feel satiated. But then all this would happen only if it rained. But it hasn't rained. The layer of dust is becoming heavier. It enters my body through my eyes and the air I breathe. I feel suffocated and scared. I loosen my clothes, and open the knot of my hair. I am caged by innumerable layers of dust. They are in the locks of my hair and in every fold of my clothes. Have I stopped breathing? My hair drop down one by one like dead reptiles. O God! Relieve me Kanu! Where are you?

Crying out 'Kanu! Kanu. . .' I wake up. What is it? My head is in Kanu's lap, his fingers are caressing my hair. I am Kanu's beloved. I can hear Kanu's flute, feel his touch, even in his absence.

Kanu is here; where can he go? I see him even in the dark. Here is his face, and his loving eyes, his warm lips. He is holding my chin and caressing my lips with his little finger. I cry out, 'Kanu.'

'Kanupriya!'

Did you hear? Did you all hear? Kanu is beckoning me. What tenderness! His every word is filled with oceans of love. How can a jealous world possibly recognise it? I am an intoxicated efflorescent flower. I am Kanu's beloved.

I wait for the evening as soon as the day breaks. In the evening I am at the window and wait for Kanu. The moment his breath mingles in the air I know that he is coming. Tearing the veils of dust, breaking through the clouds; thundering and dancing, Kanu arrives, and soaks me from head to toe.

Have I persevered like the spider?

I had read *Panchtantra* stories in my childhood. One was about a clever fox. He justified his failure to reach the grapes by saying they were sour. Yesterday, when Kanu said that he did not have time to meet me, I realised that I am not as clever as that fox. Knowing fully well that the grapes are sour, like a fool I keep jumping for it. There should be a limit to one's foolishness!

I got tired of jumping. I sat down on a rock and kept gazing at that bunch of grapes with greedy eyes. It looked raw. But my eyes and heart did not seem to agree with each other. I keep jumping from sunrise to sunset. I stare at twinkling stars and I realise the truth.

Krishna never looked back once he left Gokul. Radha kept shedding tears for him. It is said that her tears turned into stars and filled the sky. Who was that god who covered the earth, the nether world and the heaven in three steps? Krishna showed such fantastic miracles to impress his devotees. Can't he make Radha happy by his nearness to her? Well, Krishna is a man after all. What difference does it make even if he is a god! I am not talking about the fundamental principle of Male and

Female at the metaphysical level. I am talking about a man and a woman in our real hard world. Man has always maintained a higher seat. He may cheat, break promises, and still he is a donor, a philanthropist. And the woman is the receiver. How strange are the ways of the world! Even Radha accepted this situation, who was otherwise so proud! And all other women thereafter conceded to it. Man showered all his favours on those who accepted this disparity. So did society. A woman who revolted was considered purile, shameless or useless.

Kanu and I were sitting on the bank of a river almost a century ago. Suddenly we head the sonorous humming sound of a bee. It drank the nectar from a flower and flew to another. Then came a butterfly fluttering its colourful wings. It kept flying around. Kanu obsrved: 'Kanupriya, did you see the bee and the butterfly? Both keep going from one flower to the other. They both suck nectar. Apparently there is no difference between them, and still one is serious, the other fickle.'

I disagreed: 'Kanu, the bee is clever. It goes about doing its work, keeps a serious hum going and pretends to be busy. The butterfly is innocent. It does not mind showing to the world what it is upto. It displays its exuberant colours. It does not pretend the way a bee does.'

Kanu: 'Priya, pretension is the real way to live. One has to pretend to an extent to be able to live in an acceptable manner in society.'

I: 'Kanu, we are alive today, may not be tomorrow. Suppose these are the last moments of my life, do you know what my last thoughts would be? All I want is honest and tender sentiment from people like you. That is the truth. Does any one fondly remember contrived emotions?'

Kanu: 'I know that, but I am helpless. Still, with these shackled hands I will caress you. I will give you all the love that I can. Will you accept me?'

'No Kanu, I don't like the sound of shackles when I am touched with love. I want freedom. I desire carefree and

consistently flowing love. Chained hands get bruised and bleed. This would deprive us of the pleasure that one gets while giving or receiving joy.'

Kanu: 'Well, then the choice is yours. Don't meet me any more. I will also avoid it. I am not prepared to give up my earlier attachment, but I am still ready to share love with you.'

I: 'I don't want a share. For that matter the whole world is my own. Even in this world some are very close to us and some strangers. How can you share a person who is your own.'

Kanu: 'Yes Priya, I appreciate your feelings. But a man unlike woman is not fearless. Although a woman is more vulnerable, the man calculates his every more. Krishna was free. Radha had many responsibilities, but she neglected them and rushed to Krishna. Krishna was given just one responsibility of ruling Mathura and so he left Gokul.'

I was touched by Radha's fearlessness, depth and sincerity of her love. My eyes welled up with tears. I felt, the real donor is a woman. Who is greater? The one who scatters love freely or the one who takes care of his shackles and shares his love in miserly fashion? Who remembers Krishna's throne? But his love exploits are immortal, because his partner was Radha. It was a complete union.

I don't know why, but I consider myself Radha. The stars in the sky are Radha's tears and mine too. Tears, not of sorrow but of love, joy and fulfilment of life.

I enjoy this irrationality. Knowing fully well that the grapes are sour, I still keep jumping for them.

'Kanu! Don't you like to dream?' Priya asked with tears in her eyes. How casually Kanu had told Priya that she is no longer his beloved and he is not her Kanu! Kanu's single sentence brought autumn on the earth which always had spring.

Priya felt as if her heart was sinking. Her body was turning cold. Her lips quivered. Her voice choked. With great effort she could utter only one sentence: 'Kanu! Don't you like to dream?'

Kanu always stood firm on the ground. Priya floated with the clouds. How often did she desire to take Kanu's hand in hers and fly off to the skies! What a blissful dream! There is none over there, except for Kanu and Priya. Clouds caress them. The moon and the stars play hide and seek with them. Priya couldn't be happier. . . .

But Kanu pushed Priya from the sky. Priya felt like an ant who would get trampled by Kanu. She looked at him with fear. Kanu looked monsterous. When Krishna revealed the entire universe in his mouth, even Arjun was frightened!

Kanu is right in a way: Love, union, eagerness and excitement, all are short-lived, and meaningless. But for Priya each moment has its own enternal value. As soon as she shuts her eyes Kanu enters opening the doors of her heart. He spreads to every corner of her existence.

But Kanu's decisive sentence was a slap on Priya's face. Not one, but many.

Kanu replied to Priya's question with indifference and callousness: 'How do dreams help?'

Priya thought: 'Do you always weigh everything in the scale of benefits and losses? Why should an agitated mind be deprived of some peace and joy?'

With that thought it struck Priya that she is not Kanu's wife, she is his beloved. A beloved would accept all that she gets from her love with gratitude. What right can she exercise on Kanu?

I am not sure. Perhaps, such things do take place in a world without dreams. I was being carried away by the fast current of the river. I enjoyed the touch of water, the smell of breeze. All of a sudden I hit myself against a huge rock. Like glass I broke into thousands of pieces. The river turned red, the breeze became fire, and nature hostile.

'Kanu, let the dreams live, or the world will not be liveable.'

Translated from the Gujarati by
VARSHA DAS

A New Triangle

Ratanlal Shant

I do not know whether this story of Ratni and Surendra qualifies to be called a love story but. . .

As they came out of the court, they were feeling light, unburdened. They walked together, stealing occasional glances at each other, like a couple in love who have just succeeded in winning their parents' approval and are desperate to find a secret place away from home and prying eyes where they can take each other in their arms, gratified at having surmounted all obstacles to happiness. Would you ever expect to see a newly divorced couple walk out together, just like friends? But they did.

Surendra stopped to buy a packet of cigarettes from a shop. Ratni automatically stopped too, waiting for him to join her. Surendra turned to the right and so did Ratni. They came to the biggest restaurant in that market and both of them stopped in their tracks. Surendra spoke first, 'I'm longing for a cup of tea. If. . . .' Without a word Ratni

went through the gate and up the front steps of the restaurant, as if she had been waiting for the suggestion. Of course, she knew that this was Surendra's favourite haunt where he used to spend hours together in the company of his friends. Once, long ago, when she had expressed a desire to accompany him there, Surendra had silenced her with a sharp rebuke, 'No woman from a respectable family goes there.' The issue had snowballed into a quarrel serious enough to lead to Ratni running away to her parents' house.

They entered a cubicle. The waiter came and Ratni boldly spoke up, 'I will give the order today,' and before Surendra could react, proceeded to order a number of expensive items on the menu. Snatches of an English song could be heard.

Surendra took sips from his tea and watched Ratni's face, trying to read the expressions as they flitted across it, while she kept her eyes down. It was after years that the two of them were sitting like this, having tea together. During the past month in particular, they had been like two mad dogs, snarling and ready to bare their fangs and pounce on each other at the slightest provocation. Ratni would leave for school every morning, with instructions to Doonichand to attend to Surendra's needs. She showed hardly any interest in whether he ate anything or not. As for him, he would return late at night and fall upon his bed like an unclaimed corpse. Ratni would be gone for weeks together, staying at her parents' house and Surendra would often sleep at his friend's. Neither showed any concern for the other—the relationship of caring was over. Days would go by without their even exchanging a look. Doonichand remained the only connecting link. It was he who would enquire from one about the other out of habit, but only receive a rebuff for his pains.

The waiter stood before them with a slight smile. Ratni turned to Surendra. Today his cheeks appeared pinker than usual. There was a slight shade on his chin—a trail left by

the razor blade. She looked out of the window and searched for God knows what in the busy Amira Kadal square. One day, in this very market square, she had suddenly run into Surendra after a number of days. The Principal was with her and it was she who drew her attention to him walking in the distance. Surendra had come forward and greeted the Principal politely. As though with the right to do so, she had complained, 'What have you done to our Ratniji, Professor saheb? She seems to grow thinner everyday.'

He looked at Ratni, as though seeing her for the first time. Yes, Ratni did look altered—but then, did he look any better? And who was bothered about him? The Principal went on, 'Yours is such an ideal family and we refer to you two so often in school. How lucky you are, just the two of you. I mean when there are children, one loses ones comfort—the peaceful life is gone.'

There were no children but still there was no comfort, nor any peace. The Principal left, and Surendra asked Ratni, 'Where are you headed? Rainawari or home?'

Ratni shrugged her shoulders, 'Might even go home.' The two took their seats in the bus. Neither spoke to the other. On arrival at home, both went into the bedroom. Doonichand brought tea, but noticing the scowls on their faces, said nothing and just slunk away. Ratni broke the silence, 'I am sorry to have upset your plans—you had to come home because of my Principal.'

The strain showed on Surendra's face as Ratni continued, 'I know you are itching for a fight. My going off to Rainawari is a good excuse.' Surendra went on sipping his tea quietly. After a while, he said, 'I know your school is close to your parents' house, that is why you are there whenever it pleases you.' Ratni stood up, 'It is ages since I have seen you laugh. I know you feel confined because of me. Were I to be knocked off while commuting, you would find a happy release. Why do you turn dumb at home?

Otherwise you are articulate enough.' Surendra laughed. 'This is an original line. Where is your usual refrain: "Were I to die you'd be inconsolable in your grief and then you'd know my worth."' Ratni, beginning to undress, retorted, 'But of course, do you think anyone else is going to bother about you?' Surendra too got up to change. 'I have told you once and for all that your abusing yourself does not matter to me in the least. You might find emotional relief through these antics but if you think it will upset or worry me, you have another think coming.' Ratni retaliated with a dramatic, 'And that you couldn't care less and that your heart is as hard as iron and your determination steely, isn't it?'

The servant came and stood before the door. Seeing him, Ratni snapped, 'And what do you think you are doing there?'

Doonichand, taken aback, replied feebly, 'What should I cook, Madam?' Surendra answered, 'Meat. I feel like having *biryani* today.' Ratni addressed the servant, 'There is no ghee in the house, *biryani* is out.'

'Saheb brought some the other day when you were at Rainawari,' the servant announced with a mischievous glint in his eye and left.

Surendra picked up the thread again, 'Know nothing about my steel determination, do you? Want me to remind you of the time we were married?' This seemed to silence Ratni but then she said, 'I am not interested in these old stories. How long will you stretch them? I have told you once and for all, you are a loner, just a loner—you were fine as long as you were single—you should never have married.'

'If I had not, how could I have enjoyed the privilege of hearing your highly original curses and abuses?'

Ratni seemed to be saying to herself, 'This is the price I must pay for being born as an Indian woman—and then to be a Kashmiri Pandit. How can I fight back? And why should he care? He will do just fine without me.'

'Of course I will. You think I will cry and plead before you? Fall at your feet and beg, "Oh please don't leave me. . . if you do, I shall kill myself."'

Ratni's fingers froze over the blouse hook and her face turned red with anger. Gesticulating wildly, she shouted, 'Whether you suffer or not is of no consequence to me. Do you hear? This is not the Ratni of seven years ago who used to agonise over her parents-in-laws' moods, torture herself waiting for her husband's return at midnight so that she too could put something into her mouth—I have gone through the furnace and become hard as nails.'

'How long will you go on trading these worn-out phrases? They mean nothing,' said Surendra, as he sat on his bed and picked up a book.

'And how long will *you* go on with your pseudo-psychoanalysis? Isn't that worn to a shred too?'

After finishing their quiet tea, they left the restaurant. The waiter waved to Surendra knowingly, as though wishing him luck with his new girl.

Surendra felt refreshed—now he was the sole master of his life. As they were leaving home this morning, there was no discussion of future plans—no decision regarding the division of their joint possessions, the house in which they were tenants, the household goods, the single servant. They just got ready and left as if they were going to a party or a wedding—headed straight for the Judge's chamber and were the first to get their divorce papers signed. Leaving the court, they walked together since no fixed plans had been made beforehand. Surendra turned homewards as they came out of the restaurant and Ratni followed mechanically. They did not take a bus and walked companionably as though relishing a rare experience. In the old days any excuse would have done to start bitter recriminations, each holding the other responsible for the dreary, meaningless life they were leading.

It was Surendra who was the first to rebel against his parents, dramatically returning all the engagement gifts sent by the parents of the girl chosen for him by his family, declaring his decision to marry Ratni instead. Ratni arrived on cue and the two walked out together, disappearing for two whole weeks. But when they returned, an anticlimax awaited them. In their absence, both their parents had come to terms with the situation and Surendra and Ratni were married like any other traditional Kashmiri Pandit couple. Within a few months, however, Surendra had an argument with his parents and declared that he could no longer live in a joint family. Far from protesting or creating a scene, his father handed some keys over to him, as if waiting for this, and said, 'Here you are son. Lodgings have already been taken for you and advance rent paid for the month.' This took the wind out of his sails but he bottled his resentment. Ratni was furious. They left for their new home. As they were going through the bazaar, someone passed a lascivious comment, 'Seen such goods after a long time indeed. What a lucky dog!' But Surendra walked on as though deaf.

Once, in this very bazaar, he had snatched the whip from a *tongawallah* who had dared to make a pass at Ratni, Furious, he had thrashed the man till the whip handle broke in his hand. And gloating over his victory, he had walked towards Ratni through the crowds like a hero, but found her in tears. Sobbing, she had protested, 'Did you spare a thought for me caught in this mob, while you swaggered off to deal with the *tongawallah*? If your manliness could not tolerate an insult to me, why didn't you make arrangements for my safety while you went off to do your macho act?'

He went cold when he saw her torn blouse. Then and there he swore to himself, never, never, to take her out with him.

* * *

Ratni seemed to be lost in thought. What could she be thinking of? Surendra felt sorry for her and thought: lodgings will have to be found for her first, then I can make my own arrangements.

For the past three months the two of them had been leading separate lives. Tensions had been rising for quite some time between them, though the decision to get divorced was taken rather suddenly.

Surendra had returned late as usual. Ratni had also just got back. She was changing when he entered the room and continued doing so without embarrassment. She was sure he would leave and have his tea in the drawing-room, as usual. But instead he put his arms around her and covered her with kisses. She stood stiff, icily cold.

'Which film have you just seen?'

'I am hardly doing what they do in films.'

'You couldn't have had your fix for some time, how do you hope to get it here?' She pushed him away and began to dress. Enraged, he screamed, 'What else are you capable of giving?' And then he muttered to himself, 'But you do not even have that. I don't know why I am tempted . . . you are worth nothing,' he breathed hard.

Ratni burst into a mocking laughter. Fully dressed, she stood before him, perfectly in control, and said, 'This is your real face. You must be seeing it all the time, but thank God, I too have seen it now.'

Coming to bed that night Surendra said, 'Ratni, what is it that still holds us together?'

Ratni seemed to be prepared for the question and, removing the quilt from her face, answered, 'Nothing.' 'Then why this pretense of closeness and intimacy? Do you feel this widening gulf between us?'

'Don't you feel it too? To put it bluntly, we have grown too far apart.'

'Yes, why should we be afraid of facing the truth?'

Surendra's face seemed to be aglow with excitement, 'Why should we persist with the hollow pledge of emotional dependence on each other? Why drag on with this myth? What is the compulsion?' He sat up and continued, 'For once you sound truly emancipated—thinking with a clear mind. Tell me, can we honestly say that we can depend on each other in any way?'

Ratni took the words in, and her face lost colour, 'Yes, I am hardly alive—just a corpse that breathes, with no feelings left. This dead routine existence is too much for me now.'

Surendra spoke with a heavy, serious voice, 'Wouldn't it be better to put an end to it by parting ways?' There was silence for a long while. Surendra went on smoking, one cigarette after another, while Ratni stared at the ceiling. Then he came to her bed. She did not stir, lay still as a rock, indifferent to his advances. Though they tried hard, their twisted thoughts could not be unravelled. Like the *sadhu* who tried to twist a rope long enough to measure the height of the Harmukh peak, it was an exercise in futility—the rope to measure the peak could not be devised, the glacier did not melt, nor could the stream be made to flow upwards.

* * *

The first problem that accosted them on getting home was that of the house. There were three rooms in all. It was decided that for the time being each one would take a room and the drawing room would be shared. The cost of running the kitchen and the servant's pay would also be shared.

Doonichand removed one bed from the bedroom and Ratni shifted her clothes and things to the other room. While arranging his clothes in the cupboard, Surendra said with satisfaction, 'Good, we have resolved an extremely thorny issue with such maturity, without bitterness. Thank God we

did not lose our cool.' Ratni was equally enthusiastic, 'And we can both use the drawing room to entertain our respective friends and relatives.'

Surendra frowned, 'You want to deceive them? Hide the truth?'

'But we don't have to advertise it either.'

Doonichand had been feeling bewildered since the morning. Now he came, sat down on the floor and holding his head, began to cry, 'Please let me go—how can I work here any more, in these circumstances?' But Surendra calmed him with, 'How does it matter to you? We will stay on here for some time and then you can go with either of us. . . . All right, you will stay with me.' Ratni protested, 'Why should you take him? He does not belong to you alone. You. . .' but she cut herself short and went to her room. Surendra stretched himself on his bed, relishing his freedom. What a relief. To be answerable to no one for his comings and goings, or even doings. Today he was liberated from all the responsibilities and burdens of a householder. At last he could be himself, lead an honest, open life, free from subterfuge, lies, guilt. There would no longer be a gulf between his inward and outward self. He wondered what it was that had weakened him all this time. Was he not the man who had broken with all tradition and defied society with one stroke at the time of his marriage? As for Ratni, she was quite capable of standing on her own two feet. When you had no expectations of support from the partner, why cling on? Now she too was free to find her own identity. Most people merely talked of women's emancipation, it wasn't everyone who had the courage to actually make it happen.

Dinner was brought to their respective rooms. Surendra went to bed soon after. But sleep eluded Ratni.

The next day, Surendra locked his room and left early in the morning and returned only after three days. Ratni attended school as usual and like a dutiful housewife, returned

home every evening. She did not feel like going to Rainawari. At first she ignored the lock on the door of the other room, then one day casually inquired from Doonichand. He too was at a loss.

Returning on the fourth day, Surendra went straight to his room. He had hardly sat down when Ratni came in and stood before him. He shook his head, 'No, no, this won't do—you can't demand any explanations from me.'

'You are getting me quite wrong. I have come for an entirely different purpose. I want to borrow fifty rupees till the first.'

Surendra gave her the money, calling out to Doonichand. 'I have brought some mincemeat. Cook it, will you?'

As she left the room, Ratni said, 'I suggest, let it be till tomorrow. There's lots of stuff cooked already. I mean we can both pay for it tomorrow.' Surendra took out a bottle of liquor from his bag and sat cross-legged on his bed. Doonichand, who knew the signs well, brought a plate full of fried mutton and placed it before him.

After a while, Ratni came back. 'Can't we live like friends? I mean in a civilised way?'

Surendra's eyes had grown heavy-lidded and had red streaks in them. He replied, 'Why, haven't you been able to find other lodgings?'

'That is not the point. I mean I can't bear to watch you drink like this.'

'Who asked you to watch? You are the one who has invited herself in.'

Ratni grabbed the bottle and put it away in the cupboard. Surendra did not have the heart to go to the cupboard and retrieve his bottle after she left.

The days flew by. The occasions when they met were few: either while checking the accounts with Doonichand or while going in or out of the bathroom. It they met in the lobby, they would sometimes comment on college or school news. That was all.

One day Surendra suddenly realised that he had not seen Ratni leave her room at all for the last few days. He also saw a few women coming and going—all of them her colleagues. Doonichand revealed that Ratni was ill. He went to her room immediately after his return from college. She did not look well at all. Her body seemed bloated. Doonichand had already called a doctor and bought the medicines. Surendra stood near the bookshelf. He did not go too close to her. Turning the leaves of a book, he said, 'Did you show the doctor last year's test reports and hospital note?'

'The doctor knows everything—there is no need to show him old prescriptions and reports. What is happening now—today, is what matters.'

Surendra, silenced by this, stared at her face, her colourless, almost lifeless face.

'But as a friend I surely have the right to enquire whether you have any money?' and not waiting for an answer, he called Doonichand and handing him some money for the purchase of fruit and some other things, left the room without a backward glance.

But he found no peace in his room. He had never seen Ratni looking so pulled down before.

But he would not let himself go soft, brooding upon how Ratni used to look before marriage. With a firm shake of his head, he went to bed.

Two more months went by. Neither did Surendra shift from the house, nor did Ratni look for another place.

One day Doonichand asked for and was given a month's leave. On her return from school, Ratni made tea for herself. Seeing that Surendra was back too, she made him a cup. He was engrossed in a book and took the cup, unaware of who had brought it to him. Ratni was pleased and stood there watching him for quite some time. Then she snatched the book from him and said, 'Better have your tea first, sir.'

Surendra rose with a start, 'You made the tea? Why? Oh, of course, Doonichand is on leave.' Ratni laughed and went into the kitchen to cook. After a while, she came back and said, 'Will you lend me a hand? Like old times?'

'What do you mean "like old times". Today, we must talk about today.'

'Even a neighbour can be asked for help, sometimes.' She went back to the kitchen, her loosened hair swinging seductively. The sari *pallu* had slipped from her shoulder. Surendra's heart began to beat fast. He stole into the kitchen and suddenly planted a kiss on her neck. Ratni stood still, did not even turn her head, but her ears were red. Surendra, furious with himself, stamped out, regretting his impulsive action. He wondered why he had done that. Why had he lost his self-control? Shortly after, Ratni came into the room, head bowed and put her arms around him. Surnendra started guiltily and tried to pull himself free but Ratni's grip did not loosen. She whispered, 'I have bolted the door.'

'What about the windows?' Surendra could hardly speak. He felt like a shy new bride.

* * *

It is four years since the divorce papers were signed. Doonichand's health has improved considerably in this period.

As I said earlier, It is hard to tell whether this story of Surendra and Ratni can really be called a love story. Aren't there supposed to be three angles to a love story? This one has only two.

Translated from the Kashmiri by
NEERJA MATTOO

Chastity Belt

Damodar Mauzo

The customs officer rummaged through Michael's baggage. Digging out a calculator, he tossed it into his drawer. One of the two perfume sprays followed the calculator.

Michael had splurged on a beautiful designer watch for Rosy and, during the voyage, he had often dreamt of it on her delicate wrist. When the officer laid his greedy hands on the watch, Michael unable to contain his dismay, pleaded in Hindi, 'Saib, please! It's for my wife. . .' The officer retorted brutally, 'Then why did you bring just one? You should have brought two! Don't you think my wife wants one too?'

Fearing that argument against such arrogance would only mean the slapping of a heavy duty, Michael kept his mouth shut. Fortunately, the dinner set was ignored. Silently praying for the stereo to get through, he saw the officer grabbing the orange sari—the best of the three he had bought for Rosy. Clamping his jaws shut, Michael managed to keep himself in check.

Despite all this, he still had to fork out a hefty duty. Damn these bastard customs, Michael thought in a cold fury as he walked out of the company agent who had come with their payroll. Michael walked out of the docks, his pockets bulging with his accumulated wages of the nine-month trip.

Most of the shippies were Malayalees who would be staying at the Seman's Club. Goans preferred to avoid the place because of the petty thefts and drunken brawls there.

Michael shared a cab with Peter heading towards Dhobitalao where most Goan village clubs are located. When the cab halted at a traffic signal, Michael's eyes fell on a Family Planning hoarding depicting the 'Ideal Family of Four'—*Hum Do Hamare Do*. The father's face more or less resembled Michael's, but the mother's was nowhere near Rosy's. . . Rosy. It was over nine months since he'd last seen her. He suddenly recalled Rosy's letter given by the company agent along with his wages. He thrust his hands into his pocket and drew it out.

Their son was now two months old and not baptised. They were all waiting for Michael. All? What did Rosy mean by all? Mother? Sisters? Friends and neighbours? It didn't matter to him. It was Rosy who was waiting. The last time too when their first child was born. She had waited two months to christen the girl, he reflected. Despite everybody's disapproval of the delay, Rosy had waited for Michael a full two months. When Michael came they had a solemn baptism ceremony at the church followed by a litany and a grand party at home.

The memory of Rosy's graceful bearing throughout that long day never failed to light up Michael's face during the voyage. Now his face brightened again with the thought of Rosy waiting for him for the christening of the child. Christening? A pretext! Rosy must be longing for him!

Their son resembled him a lot—she wrote in the letter. He recalled old Salvador's words, 'When a pregnant woman is deeply in love with her husband and thinks of him day and night, the child invariably takes after the father.' And Rosy had definitely been thinking of him at all times—pregnant or otherwise!

'What are you thinking of, man?' Peter intruded into his thoughts.

'Uh?' Michael felt like confiding in him, but remembered that it was the same Peter who had once ridiculed him. Showering praise on Rosy's faithfulness, Michael had once said that an ideal wife should be like her—especially for a sailor. Peter had guffawed, 'Every shippie feels that his wife is a faithful angel!' Michael was very irritated with Peter but realising that argument would lead from one thing to another, he had kept quiet.

An angel Rosy may not be, but there was never any room to question her total loyalty to him.

. . . But there were also wives like Carmina!

Michael's thoughts went back to his youth.

He was at a loose end after failing his SSCE. Michael's mother wanted him to hunt for a job, while his father encouraged him to appear again for the exam. He wanted to do neither. His heart tugged at a third option—he wanted to become a seaman. Not out of any love for the ship or the sea—but for the fat salaries. His adolescent eyes would reverentially regard the transparent prosperity of all the village shippies—their slickly pomaded hair, the flashy gold-rimmed Raybans, the thick gold chains coruscating through the partly unbuttoned stylish shirts, their fingers weighed down by thick gold rings, wrists brandishing new foreign watches.

Towards fulfilling this ambition, Michael had cultivated the friendship of Caitu. And, one day, finding Caitu in a good mood, Michael confided in him his ambition of joining the merchant navy. Caitu, who had a good friend at the

recruiting office in Bombay, had patted him on the back and promised that by his next trip he would have a sea job ready for Michael.

When Caitu went back to sea, Michael continued to be of service to Caitu's family in order to remain in his good books. Carmina was often requested to remind Caitu of his assurance to Michael in her letters.

He remembered the day he was returning from the village fish market when Carmina ran into him, 'Hi Michael! Going Home? C'mon, give me a lift!' Without waiting for his reply, she'd climbed on to the cycle. Carmina had been married for over two years then and had put on some weight. Michael had to pedal hard.

On the way, she asked, 'What are you doing today evening?'

'Nothing.' Michael, after all, was idle and had plenty of time on his hands.

'There's a bag of rice to be brought from Margao. Will you come with me to town?'

'Sure.'

As she got down from the bicycle, she told her mother-in-law, 'Mai, I'm taking Michael to bring rice from Margao. The shopkeepers are cheats and the coolies fleece you. Michael will be of help.'

Mai agreed. 'Choose good, old rice, Michael,' she said. The old lady trusted Michael's common sense.

It was not yet three when they reached Margao.

'Michael, what movie is showing at the Metropole?'

'I don't know.'

'You haven't seen a movie recently?'

'No. I don't go often.' Michael preferred the local theatre.

'Shall we go for a movie? We can go to the market later.'

Michael agreed.

During the movie, Carmina kept whispering to him, tugging his arm. A couple of times he felt acutely embarrassed when his elbow brushed against her breasts.

It was late evening when they reached home.

'The rice was not good. They expect the good quality stuff next week.' Michael lied to Mai and he and Carmina kept their secret between themselves.

Many more movies followed and, once, Carmina had called him over. After her mother-in-law fell asleep, she took him in furtively through the windows. Ignoring the disparity in their ages, Michael allowed himself to be seduced by the older woman. That was his first experience of love—rather, of sex.

Michael felt a sense of disgust over such memories of Carmina intruding into his communion with Rosy.

Angrily slamming the door of the cab which had stopped beyond Metro cinema, Michael alighted. The two crossed the road and climbed the stairs to their club. Leaving his bags to be stowed in place by Peter, he descended the steps of their village club building, walked past some blocks and entered the offices of 'Goa Travels' across the road.

After booking his bus ticket for the next day, he returned to the club.

'Got your ticket?' asked Peter.

'Why not?'

He lay down to sleep—but sleep would not come.

Peter was dressing. Michael, however, was not in the mood to go out.

'Coming for a movie, Michael?'

'Where? Metro?'

'No. Today I'm in the mood to see a Hindi movie.'

It had been a long time, yes, nine long months since they'd last seen a Hindi movie.

Michael abruptly changed his mind, rose and said, 'Come on, let's go.' They went out into the streets. The hurrying crowds, the broad roads intersecting, the huge skyscrapers, the swanky hotels and posh shopping arcades, brought back to Michael thoughts of Rosy. She hadn't yet been to Bombay.

She was eager to visit the city and Michael felt he should bring her here one day. On the previous two occasions she'd asked Michael to take her to Bombay to see him off. And Michael had agreed. But both times, she was in early pregnancy—not the right time to travel, and both times the trip had to be put off.

'This time I must make a special trip to Bombay for a whole week with Rosy.' The thought of spending seven whole days alone with Rosy thrilled Michael.

He remembered the first six months of their marriage—a period of ecstatic pleasure and happiness. The lost years spent avoiding marriage were made up in more than double measure in the spate of those few months.

Yes, he'd postponed marriage till he was all of thirty-two, afraid that he'd be saddled with a wife like Carmina.

A sailor's wife is the subject of mockery and ridicule for the idle and the chauvinistic the world over. Michael needed no further proof for he'd himself eaten the pudding!

This bitter truth made him dread marriage. The thought of going abroad and leaving behind his wife was like a nightmare. He was too raw to have harboured such forebodings during his liaison with Carmina.

Caitu had kept his promise and had sent Michael his papers.

Michael remembered the last night he had spent with Carmina before embarking on his first voyage. 'Will you remember me, Carmina?' He'd asked in between their love-making.

'Why? Won't I get someone else?' She had replied archly. Michael had thought she was joking.

But when he returned after his first trip, he had understood that she had already found another paramour. It had dawned on him then that some people could keep love and lust in two separate, convenient compartments.

Memories of Rosy aroused by the courtship and love scenes of the Hindi movie at the Liberty heightened Michael's

discomfort. Rosy should have been at his side. When he took her to the cinema, he wanted no one else with them. Unbidden, thoughts of Carmina came back. . . It was when Caitu and Carmina had taken him to the cinema. Caitu had put his arm round her shoulder, tickling and petting her. Pretending to ignore them, he had tried to concentrate on the screen. But he had been highly excited—probably even more aroused than Caitu.

The next day, Michael boarded the Goa-bound bus. At the Panvel checkpost, the bus was stopped and the patently foreign suitcase of Michael was brought down for checking and promptly replaced after the mandatory 100-rupees note changed hands.

His sleep was disturbed three times in the night—all three times he had seen Rosy in his dreams.

Early morning, as the bus left Sawantwadi, a fellow passenger started gathering his baggage.

'Getting down at Assonora?' asked Michael.

'No', the elderly man smiled in embarrassment and explained. 'I know it's childish. Every year I come home from Bombay. Once the bus crosses Sawantwadi, I get the feeling that I'm close to home and start gathering my luggage.' Pausing, he added. 'And then, I get impatient because we just don't seem to reach!'

Michael agreed whoeheartedly because he too often felt the same way. The old man continued, 'Normally we find the journey from Margao to Bicholim long and tedious, but when coming from Bombay, we cross the border and get the feeling that we are about to reach Margao.'

By now Michael had lost interest in the conversation. Anxiety to reach home had made him restive since. . . since when? Since the ship had dropped anchor outside Bombay harbour and had to wait for three days to get a berth and come alongside. Those three days never seemed to end. Then the unloading, the customs clearance, the ride to the club,

the boarding of the bus, and now at last in Goa—his home a mere fingertip away.

At eight in the morning, when the bus stopped at Panjim to drop off some passengers, Michael, impatient at what seemed an undue delay, shouted at the conductor, 'Why are you waiting? We are already late.'

The conductor pacified him, '*Arre baba*, you're lucky. Normally we reach Panjim only at nine and even at ten sometimes.'

On arriving at Margao, he grabbed the first available taxi and hurried home.

Rosy must have been nursing the child. She rushed out with the baby still on her breast when she heard Michael. A reunion after a nine-month separation. Michael embraced her tightly.

'*Arre*! *Arre*! Don't squash *baba*! Look at him at least?'

'The baby! He looks just like me!' Remembering old Salvador's words, Michael hugged Rosy yet again. Unmindful of Mai, he whispered in Rosy's ear. 'You were thinking of me day and night, no? That's why he looks so much like me.'

Michael did not go out for the next four days. He and Rosy sat together, ate together and slept together. There was so much to share.

It was the same when they were first married. Three months after their marriage Michael was not at all concerned with going back to sea. Each time he received a call, he would send a medical certificate.

Even Rosy had once asked Michael, 'When will you go?'

'You want me to go?'

'Not that, but people are talking. Mai keeps asking me. She even asked you the other day.'

'Let them talk. Why does it bother you?'

Michael was angry.

'You don't understand, Michael. People are saying that you are still infatuated with your wife!'

Infatuated he certainly was—totally smitten! And why not? A beautiful face complemented her perfect figure.

The thought of leaving this lovely young woman and goint out to sea. . .what if she turned into another Carmina?

At one time Michael had justified to himself Carmina's infidelity. The blame lay with husbands who left their young wives home starved of love. How long was a woman expected to deny her body?

But now he no longer thought along those lines. He was obsessed with this problem. Rosy could not be taken on the ship with him. Keeping her back home would attract the lascivious glances of the village louts. Mai was getting older by the day. Rosy certainly was blameless but one could be overcome by temptation. He had even considered giving up his sea job but the good news had come suddenly—Rosy was pregnant.

Asking his mother to take good care of Rosy and free of marital worries, Michael had buoyantly resumed his duties. At that first parting, Rosy had asked him, 'Michael won't you be there when our son is born?'

Hugging her tightly, he had said. 'You know that the trip is for nine months, but I assure you I won't wait a day longer.'

Rosy, controlling her disappointment, had said, 'But you know that I'll wait to baptise the child. This is my second month. When you return the baby will be two months old. I'll wait.'

She had indeed waited. Only, that first time, it was a daughter.

After that voyage, it was a re-enactment of the first episode. After their reunion, the days in the company of Rosy just flew. The weeks merged into months. Calls were answered again by medical certificates. People once again began talking. Mother fretted about the calls ignored.

And once again—the good news!

'Let's hope that it's a boy this time,' Rosy had whispered in his ears.

'We'll pray for a son,' Michael had whispered back.

He had promptly packed his bags and left for work free of worries.

Seven months later, when his ship was in Genoa, he had got the news.

Michael had danced on hearing that he had a son. He had felt an intense longing to return home. He had even toyed with the idea of going back on medical grounds. But since it was only two months and it might have blotted his career record, he had given up the idea.

And now he was home. Rosy. Rosy. Rosy.

The two months flew past.

'Rosy, I'd better give up sea life. I think I'll resign,' said Michael one evening.

'Michael, are you mad? What sort of a job will you get here?' Rosy asked him bluntly.

That was true but, even after two children, Rosy was still slender and beautiful. Her body was still smooth and tender with no hint of flab anywhere. Even now, she aroused him as sensually as on their wedding night. She was not like other women who aged visibly after the first pregnancy. Some became thin and haggard, while others bloated up like pumpkins. They couldn't even attract a squint-eyed glance! No doubt it saved their husbands worries about their fidelity!

But a young woman, slim and youthful like Rosy. What could one do? There was no solution in sight.

While in bed, Rosy told Michael, 'We're lucky to have a boy and a girl. Should we put a stop?'

'Uh! Why?' Michael was suddenly attentive.

'Two is enough. A small family is good in all respects. And more deliveries will ruin my figure.'

Michael cut her short. . .

The computer in his brain whirred and out popped the solution. . . the solution he was looking for.

It did not matter if her figure was ruined. No lascivious eye would follow her. During pregnancy and a few months after, no covetous glances follow a woman and. . . this period is most safe to go on a voyage and return in time—to begin the safety measure all over again.

'No, Rosy' Michael pronounced decisively. 'Don't fret about the children. It's my responsibility.'

And, two months later, he once again embarked on another ship—free of worries.

Translated from the Konkani by
XAVIER COTA

The Game of Chess

Kamala Das

The wrinkles of old age have captured the face of the man I love. When he stands still, or even when he walks, his heavy hands remind me of the lifeless hands of a dancing puppet.

Alone, I sat in the last row of a medium-sized theater thinking of his special features. On the screen a film hero with a broad face was trying to attract the heroine by words and smiles. But I was not able to concentrate on the scene. One part of me—my mature self—kept asking my other, weaker self: why do you love this man who offers you only pain?

I am unable to bear this pain of mine. It is affecting my body too. I lean my head back and close my eyes. My hair brushes against the hard walls. The light emanating from the screen scorches my eyelids. My uneasiness grows. It was as though he had crept inside me; as if his colour, his voice, the smell of his body were mingled with my blood.

A shadow moved in front of me and sat in the next chair. It was a Chinaman. I was temporarily consoled by the nearness of a man.

The name of the film's hero was Presley. He was shaking his hips vigorously and singing. Today, however, his attractive and erotic movements only irritated me. The girls sitting in the rows next to the screen were screaming. I could not understand why they were so happy. It seemed as though I had landed on another planet and was listening to people speaking in an alien language. I had forgotten this language special to youth—I, who was familiar with it only a few months ago.

In getting to know him, did I cast off my youth as well? Who knows? I still laugh. That is, if you can call it laughter, this sound, like the fluttering of a bird's wings, produced by me, in front of others. Every night, before I go to sleep I apply face-cream to ward off pimples. I wear silk saris. But, after performing each of these rituals, I ask myself, 'For whose sake are you doing this? You are the forsaken one.' But, I hadn't expected my fate to be any different. Could I hope for anything else from that happily married man? Yet, on the day when my husband introduced him to me, I was elated in spite of an inner warning that predicted a bad end.

My desire to love grew to become a yawning chasm: early marriage did nothing to help it. Here was a man who was not good looking, but could be trusted and admired. Have I not mentioned earlier, the creases in his face? I found his behaviour falsely modest, but his words were very friendly. That day, what did we talk of? Poetry? I cannot recall.

I just kept listening to his voice. A soft voice, smooth, it rolled like wheels. As I listened to him talking it seemed to me that his mouth was filled with words which kept falling out rapidly.

On that day, darkness swamped the twilight earlier than usual. In his sitting room, the lights were on. He sat against a background of shelves filled with books. I thought of the portraits of writers which appear in magazines. It occurred to me that the room was a stage and the books, the props. He had given to himself the role of an intellectual. I forgave him for the childishness of that setting and the artificiality of his posture. I even went to the extent of loving all that. Had I seen him amidst the middle-class glory of potted plants and curios encased in glass cases, I might not have been so attracted to him.

So far, I have not talked of his smile. He has yellow teeth. One of them is slightly out of line, jutting out. But even this mark of ugliness arouses in me an irrational respect for him.

The Chinaman was now looking at me quite openly. Suddenly I realised that I was crying. I removed my spectacles and covered my face with my hands. I chanted his name soundlessly. Sowmyamurthi, Sowmyamurthi, Sowmyamurthi. Just like a prayer that offers fulfillment through mere repetition. What a name! A name filled with beauty! Is there anything not beautiful about him?

Except my own heart which has now grown old and lifeless.

But this love which I feel towards him, I do not think it is the activity of one organ within me. It is the collective activity of all the parts of my body. Often, my eyes rove his face, seeking to delve into its folds and creases. My cold fingers too have the same intention and they move with a mind of their own. My pathetic hands and legs demand the embrace of those hands and legs, older than them, for their peace of mind. So this love is a joint effort of all these and other parts.

The din in the film increases. A band of musicians wearing black costumes is yelling out a song. The singer stands in

front of them in a white outfit. His movements are those of a madman. The audience sits still. The good-looking hero has hypnotised them.

I stood up and wiped my face with a crumpled handkerchief. This film could go on for another half an hour. But I can't bear this loneliness.

'Are you leaving?' the Chinaman, sitting near me, asked. I smiled. Established customs and etiquette may be useful to some mild people who go through their lives without a change of gear. They have no meaning for people like me. 'I came here to forget a man. But I didn't succeed.'

I walked out. As I reached the front of the theater, I saw the street had fallen into a stupor in the morning sun's silvery glow. It was winter. But the day was very hot. Crossing the street to reach my car, I turned and looked back. The Chinaman was standing in front of the theater, his eyes lustreless from the sun's rays, with the puzzled look of a blind man.

Soon, I started the car. It shuddered once or twice as though my mental turmoil had affected it. I pressed the clutch hard with my left foot. When I think of this meaningless hurry, I feel like laughing.

I drove the car slowly down Strand Road. I saw the ships and the boats, afloat on water. The ships were painted in a cheap, shiny oil paint. They looked like toys. The river had a muddy colour.

I stopped the car, got out and sat on an iron bench, below a tree. I kept telling myself that I would not be able to forget him in this way, for I had sat on this very bench and talked to him. Once he talked of religion. I remember the sun that shone on that day, the wrinkles below his eyes and even the shape of the leaf that fell into my lap. The memory pains me like a sudden slap across my face. He narrated a story to me. The story of a man who bought a mask and kept it in his house. He could not avoid seeing

the mask, while he read, ate or slept. Nagged by its ugliness, he smashed it into pieces. But he could not wipe it out of his mind. 'Whatever is on your outer layer will remain inside you also,' Sowmyamurthi said, ending his story. At that moment, I wanted to die. Leaving this mortal body which is like a nest, I would then be free to remain inside his heart. After many years, when he also would be transformed into a soul, both of us would fly back to the old tree and hang from its frame like two bats. As my thoughts took this direction, Sowmyamurthi turned his head to look at me with a smile. A smile, exchanged like a secret gift. My husband, who sat one foot away, did not see the smile.

Now, when I think of that smile I am unable to stem the flow of my tears. What happened to the relationship built during those summer days? I do not know. One day, my husband asked me, 'Is he your teacher?' His voice was filled with pride and joy. For it was he who first introduced me to Sowmyamurthi.

How happy I was during those days! Unbelievably happy! I did not try to analyse our relationship or give it a name. In a way, my love was simple and childlike, like the devotion of tribals. I refrained from asking myself why I loved him. An unsophisticated person does not seek the aid of psychological reasoning or inquiry. His colourful God stays in the temple built for it. What else is needed? In reality, the temple for such a God is not built of mere mud and stone. It is born out of the sense of loss created by the pain of emptiness. In those days, when I walked alone in the dark rooms of my house I sang for sheer joy. Each footstep was part of a dance. I looked in the mirror and smiled. At such times I felt that he was standing behind me. I forgot my loneliness for the first time, after my childhood. I did not have to wear my loneliness like a birth-mark and walk around with a heavy heart amidst laughing people.

Some yards away from me a nomadic family from Kathiawar was preparing their food. A young woman walked up and down, stopping to pick up a spoon or a brass plate. The sound of her anklets was soothing. The old men sat in a circle and smoked pipes made of coconut shells. A man with a red turban was leaning on the railings and gazing at me. He looked young. He was also dirty like the others. But I saw in him a certain pride born of youth and an awareness of the importance of one's body. His dark eyes seemed to tell me, 'You may have wealth and beauty. Your body may be sprayed with perfumes. But I know who you are and what you want. . .' I felt uneasy. I got up and went and stood near that group. A three-year old child with black teeth ran up to me and caught hold of my knees. I lifted her hand and kissed her cheeks. She had the taste of new earth. The woman looked at me and laughed. But I couldn't see any joy in her laughter. Not knowing what else to do I quickly got into the car and left that place.

I had no specific aim. When one road ended, I turned into another. That was all. My eyes were brimming over with tears. The policeman seemed to my eyes to be a misty ghost. I told myself, 'Go back home. Today is Sunday. Return to those rooms where the sunlight does not enter. Go back to those rooms which make you into a sword, resting in its sheath. In that place, you will not have the cruelty to be yourself.' Infatuation is kinder than love. If the feeling that I had for Sowmyamurthi was infatuation and not love, would I have dared to embrace him on that day? No, I wouldn't. He was not surprised. But he said in a sad voice, 'I am old enough to be your father, Achala. You know that, don't you?'

In that moment, my soul split into many parts. Each part voiced its own, different opinion. Only the girl who learnt the first lessons of love from her grandmother whispered: 'You are giving trouble to this man. It is better

to leave him alone.' I felt that was the only voice of truth, resurrected from various voices.

Sowmyamurthi made me sit in a sofa and sat near me. I thought that he was shivering. In that moment I could have conquered him. A physical conquest! Such a victory would have given me only the lowly pleasure of seeing his shame and guilt. A woman in love is never satisfied if her lover remembers her with only one part of his body. She wishes to grow like a cancer within him, to fill him with awareness and pain. That is the special cruelty of love.

He fumbled, faced with my love. He was not prepared to accept it. The sacrifice of one's body kills only its mortal pride. But, such a sacrifice destroys the soul's self-respect for ever. I did not waste my time in consoling myself. In this game, unknowingly, I had moved my last pawn, an act which could not be undone. What could I do now?

'Forget, forget,' I went on chanting to myself. But he said, 'You won't be able to forget. Nor can I.'

I felt that those words were benumbing me like a death sentence. I began to kiss his face thinking, let me win at least these minor victories. How long he lay like that, I do not remember. All I know is that he was not eager to wake up from that sleep or my embrace.

The *Bhagavad Gita* asks, 'Why does a man commit a sin, even though he doesn't want to, as though he is being forcibly made to do so?' My heart was filled with compassion. I had disturbed his peace of mind, at least temporarily. I ran my fingers over his face, through his hair. I tried to recall the men I had loved before. Their faces had become blurred like the faces one saw from a speeding train. Each of those relationships was like the play rehearsals one had with understudies, in the absence of main actors. This act was devoted just to him. But he was trying to turn and walk away. Even as his lips were subdued by my lips I heard the footsteps of his withdrawal.

I asked him, 'We won't see each other again will we?' Then, unable to bear the truth, I threw my hands around his neck and added hurriedly: 'Promise me. Promise me that we'll meet again.' I remembered another promise. Earlier, I had made my grandmother promise me that she would not die. She was not able to keep that promise. Would this man's words also prove to be false?

'I promise. We'll see each other again,' he assured me. After that, I didn't ever see him again. That was our last meeting.

That night, my husband sat on the bed and began to weep. Silently, without moving any of his face muscles, he shed tears. The quiet dignity of that weeping moved me. I too sat on the bed.

He asked, 'Why did you do that?'

'Do what?'

'You do not love me at all, Achala.'

That evening he had gone to see Sowmyamurthi. In a moment, everything became clear to me. Sowmyamurthi must have told him all that had happened on that day with the cruelty commonly found in people who were anxious to withdraw from anything which had turned out to be like a ritual. I did not feel like offering any excuses. So I said, 'I will not see him again, I promise.'

I decided to keep that promise. I did not want to lessen my burden of guilt through half-truths and palming off some guilt to Sowmyamurthi. He had a position in society, a wife, and children. Nor was he young any more. His shoulders would not be able to bear the burden of guilt. What about me? I was a poor human being who had, for the first time, learnt to love another human being better than herself. I was young. I would take up his burden of guilt like a flag of victory, with courage and pride.

I stopped the car and climbed the steps leading to my house. The door was kept open for me. In the verandah, by

the side of a flower vase that held blue flowers that glittered like stars, sat my husband doing nothing. I did not have even the courage to show compassion.

I took some sleeping pills from the bathroom shelf and sat on the bed. I looked at those pills, hesitatingly, as though they were my enemies. Is this the only way to keep my word?

The God of the Hindus told Arjuna, 'At the time of death if a person remembered another person's form, he would retain the memory of that form and take on that form.' If I died soon after the scene, I would live within him like a sin. I do not want that kind of immortality. I must live within him in beauty, like a smile, or like a shaft of sunlight.

I kept the bottle back on the shelf and went and stood in front of the mirror. 'Achala, you poor fool,' I told myself, 'After this day your eyes will reflect only your own face. Your ears will hear only your own voice. Let this loneliness be your next love.'

I was amused, for some reason, at the turn that my thoughts had taken. My husband came to the door wondering why I burst into laughter.

I shall not tell him why I laughed.

Translated from the Malayalam by
VASANTHI SANKARANARAYANAN

The Bed of Arrows

Gopinath Mohanty

Back from work, today he emitted a sweet fragrance. Turning on her side, her face contorted with pain, Kamala looked at his face from her bed.

She remembered her decision not to speak any more of her pain, nor to reveal the agony on her face; instead she would smile, or at least try hard to smile. Yet why does she feel a dampness within? Why does she find some happiness in the thought that her days are numbered? And that she should not prove herself a worthless burden on him?

Before she could sport a smile, Surababu, his face dry, had come nearer her. Pressing her head with his left hand and playing with her dishevelled hair he asked, 'Do you feel any increase in your pain today? Oh God, what should I do, how long to carry on this way?'

Kamala smiled. 'What's new in my pain? It is the same old thing,' she said.

His face seemed to dry up further before her sharp gaze.

'Why won't you say so! That is in your nature, I mean nature of the women folk. Never to say what is going on inside even to yourself, let alone to another. You think that if you burn yourself out in the service of the others in a single-minded devotion, the heavens will be yours first, isn't that so, Kama?'

Surababu extended his hand to caress her cheeks. But as if in a desperate bid to escape his touch, she withdrew her face writhing in pain. She felt a stab of pain in the chest and a sudden dizziness as she closed her eyes and floated in an emptiness. Half a minute later, she was herself again, and bit her lower lip. 'You have not even changed your clothes, you must be feeling wretched. Will you please go and eat something?' she said and then called out to their cook-cum-servant, Indira, in a nasal voice.

'I am going,' said Surababu. 'You don't have to shout. That will only aggravate your weakness and pain. How much do you think is left of your body?' She sighed and closed her eyes. But Surababu was still there when, a minute later, she opened her eyes.

'How much is left of your body?' The words echoed in her ears. The fragrance returned to her nose. Her vision was getting blurred. Things grew alternately clear and hazy.

Now she could see a human body sparkling in the pale wintry light after the rains. That is her husband. His forty-sixth birthday was approaching, yet the structure continued to be strong; rather it had grown stronger. The wide forehead, the glow of knowledge in the face, the chin adamantine to fight and overcome obstacles—remain unchanged. And that body was her property, only hers!

Kamala had gooseflesh, her face grew hot, there was a burning around her eyes and hungrily she started at Surababu. She remembered his words of sympathy. His was a lovely body, but what had she been reduced to! The tiny cloud of

suspicion that floated on her consciousness suddenly became huge and there was intimation of rain. She pressed her teeth hard as she muttered. 'What use for an empty wine-cup?'

Surababu, startled, asked, 'What did you say?' Kamala smiled with jealousy, but said, 'Nothing much. But, see, it's a long time I have been telling you that I am bedridden, can do precious little for you and you need care. For my sake, you must. . . .'

To her surprise, she noticed that Surababu did not turn his face away, he did not blink repeatedly and there was no sign of sadness as before. Instead, there was anger in his voice, as he said, 'What nonsense you speak!'

Kamala felt a sinking feeling, not because of his anger but out of an unknown fear. 'Are you angry?' she said, 'You have just returned after a hard day's work, why don't you go, change, have a wash and eat something? Why do you keep standing here?'

And once again she squeaked, 'Indira, can't you hear me? Babu is standing here!'

Surababu walked away. The breeze retained that fragrance only for a while. Kamala kept thinking, vacantly looking up, in her bed. Outside the shadows lengthened. She could see the drumstick plant. Its leaves flashed a smile in the sun a little while ago, and now it was slowly becoming a column of darkness.

She went back in her memory: twenty-two long years. Ghana was yet to be born. Manika and Suna were not there even in the realms of her dream. It was the first year after their marriage.

'You exude such a fragrance, Kama!'

'Please move. Mother is in the other room and, look, someone, maybe one of your students, is knocking at the door. You have come back after a hard day's teaching. Are you not hungry?' All around there was a fragrance. Covering his own face with her dishevelled hair he lay silent and still.

'Would you please go away?'

'Quiet! I can hear a song!'

'What nonsense!'

'There is music in the human breast, fragrance in the body and do you know what there is in the touch?'

'Fire?'

'No, you are wrong. The touch has the caress of the lotus and sleep!'

'Yes, everything is there in your language. You are, after all, a professor of literature.'

'Let us not talk of literature. Literature is not greater than life, it is no substitute for life. It is an act that leans on life. Wait, let me drink life.'

'Are you not ashamed?'

'Shame is only a superficial mask. Why have something in which you don't believe?'

Startled, Kamala tried to get up, but there was an explosion of all the familiar pain and weakness in her body. Piteously she kept lying and sulked and could recognise that the fragrance was nothing special, but of an *attar*, available in the bazaar. From one who has applied it, the fragrance jumps on to another. It was a long time since she had forgotten all about toiletry. Forgetting all personal pleasures, all her tender habits, she had made herself a tough housewife, rearing children. Now they had emerged into the wide world. Manika and Suna had set up their own homes. Ghana was a student of forestry at Coimbatore. Once he took up a job, he should get married even though he was a child, so that there would be a daughter-in-law in the house.

She had sacrificed all her desires and pleasures, deriving satisfaction only in giving, in sacrificing and bringing up the children. The soft palms had grown rough in domestic chores; her colour had faded and there was an increasing loss of hair. Feeding herself was only a ritual after feeding all the others. For her clothes she managed with whatever was

available; a little coconut oil was enough for her body. Her only wealth was her right to work. And now, for a year and half, she had lost even that right and lay bed-ridden. Doctor after doctor had examined her; so many medicines had her body absorbed, but to no avail. The same soreness in the waist and the legs, the weakness was on the increase. She knew that her body was slowly wasting away.

She and *attar*! But that fragrance had returned through his body perhaps only to tease her. He was unusual that way; never cared for perfumes; often even forgot to shave, comb his hair or dress properly. Great in knowledge, a professor, everything looked nice on him, but surely not *attar*.

Who had passed it on to him?

How good was her husband and indeed, and how beautiful. God had been kind to her!

Darkness was deepening. Kamala wept, only a few wet drops of tears in her hot eyes.

Indira brought in a lamp. Kamala enquired and was told that Surababu had gone out.

'Where did he go?' she asked.

'He did not tell me.'

She fell silent.

The *attar* was available in the market and there was nothing exclusive about it.

The world was full of human beings too and if you seek, you get. No one waits. And all the concerns, all shows of love, were only for a while, something of a lie.

Turning back in the bed Kamala lay quiet; there were more tears. Indira stood beside her. He was used to her tears, but he felt sad every time he saw them.

'What should I make for dinner?' he asked.

'How long do you expect me to be here that you should keep on asking me?'

Her voice sounded slurred.

The effeminate Indira asked as he kept chewing the tip of his dhoti, 'You are crying, sister? Why, won't you get well soon?'

'Let this body go into the hearth-fire. What use was this kind of living if suffering is all? Who cares for whom?'

Indira left. She wiped her face. She had frankly declared her wish to die at last before someone and now felt somewhat light.

She lay cooly thinking of death which was surely better than doing nothing except blinking.

But when would it come? She could not recollect any instance of forgiveness from anyone but there were numerous instances of remonstrances at not being served.

Ghana was desperately attached to her but first and foremost, his love was his studies, his future. Four months ago, even when she was critically ill, could he manage to stay for more than four days? His father also insisted that he should not spoil his studies. In fact that was the chorus from all the throats. And Manika and Suna belonged to other households. How often could they come? Each one, after all, had a world of her own to look after.

The one who was her own, had gone away for a walk, without uttering even a word to her.

The lights were on. Kamala looked outside as she lay quiet, her mouth half-open as if she had stopped in the midst of saying something and her mind had flown away elsewhere.

She thought that she was at the age when the body's desires should end. She had a son and two daughters, she had stepped into her husband's house at the age of fifteen and had passed twenty-two years managing the house. It was one long stretch of time during which some of her acquaintances had passed away while others managed their broken homes. She thought of Ghana's birth twenty-one years ago. The hospital, the pain, a small operation, dressing, the unseasonable rain and the bitter cold wind

that made one shiver. The peace-loving professor would wake up with a start at her cry and say, 'Can't you sleep quietly? The child has now woken up too!' The baby, too, cried bitterly.

Life leans on happiness. It cannot continue with a sense of fear submerging it. Sometimes she had let herself go and in sheer self-defence ignored the precepts of the scriptures. The body remained a body, suffered injury, recovered only to await other injuries.

After Ghana came Manika and then Suna. They were the fruits of happiness, if not of ecstasy.

Even then she persuaded herself; the body's desires must end. So often she would tell her weakling friend Sovana: 'My friend, life seems to be only a stretch of suffering and agony. Where is happiness? It was so wonderful—those days in our father's home! Swimming, plucking flowers, climbing trees, racing to nowhere. Can one ever get back those carefree days?'

Often she remembered the living shadow of the strong and healthy limbs and heard the seductive whispers of the past.

Sighs and waves of philosophy, as she realised in practical life, often surged up to the surface.

Her friend understood. After the birth of her second child, she was bloodless, suffering from indigestion and frequent loose motions. Soon she was only a frame of bones. Her husband was a foreman in a steel plant and he looked strong as a Bhima.

She always agreed with Kamala. 'Alas, who knew about all the pains involved in building a home and raising children? How fleeting is one's shine, one's strength!'

Kamala would nod and keep mum. She could never think of Surababu as greedy or cruel. She had the keys to their chests and he always brought to her whatever he earned. He had no fancy for anything. He could never be compared to her friend's husband.

She would negate her own words and console her friend, 'It is all a matter of destiny, dear friend!' Kamala could guess her friend's condition from her crumpled clothes, unoiled hair and weak body. And she knew the *paan*-chewing bony figure was indeed a rebel, but it suppressed more than it spoke.

Her friend managed to live containing within, her secret spirit of revolt, but once again she was in the family way. This time, however, she could not live to see the offspring's face. Her foreman husband had the baby boy in his arms as the mother lay on the bed like a dirty shred of discarded linen.

Kamala had heard about this tragic finale from Surababu. With tears in his eyes, the sympathetic professor, a lover of literature, had given a graphic picture of the event. In his elegant words the event had come alive.

Kamala had felt the loss inside as a woman. Her consciousness that was looking for deliverance had, as it were, met her friend somewhere in the sky. She had a sudden vision of that bony face, a curve of a smile ridiculing life. Kamala used to pity that but today she herself was an object of pity. She felt as if it was her friend who had won, while she herself had been bankrupt of pity.

She felt like asking, 'All of us would depart, sooner or later. Why then suffer this life?' Her pain was returning with a vengeance as she remembered things and pieced them together. The evening when Surababu introduced to her a 'new person', Srimati Chandra Midha alias Usharani Devi from Siam. She was a professor in a Ceylonese women's academy. She had come under an exchange programme for teachers. She taught English but had acquired proficiency in Hindi, Bengali and Tamil. She spent two months at Puri earlier where she learnt to speak fluently in Oriya. She was guileless, almost child-like. Surababu added, 'I am now proving to her that her ancestors were from this Kalinga and hence her knowledge of Oriya lay dormant in her.'

Chandra Midha kept smiling but there was a blowing motion in her body. She brought her arms together and then threw them apart like a gymnast.

'Swagatam!' said Surababu.

'Welcome!' she reciprocated and uttered a few phrases explaining the genesis of the word.

'Did you see how much she knows?' Surababu commented with great appreciation.

Chandra Midha winked and tried to compare the words for love in English, Hindi, Bengali and Oriya. Kamala laughed. Surababu said nothing. 'Devi Chandra Midha! How many children do you have?' asked Kamala.

Surababu stared hard at Kamala. Chandra Midha laughed strangely, and its ripples spread all over her face and along the rows of her pearly teeth inside her coral lips.

She asked Surababu 'Wachat?' meaning what was that? Surababu played the host all alone. Kamala did not struggle to get up.

Kamala is like that—let him explain to her—she decided. From the drawing room their laughter floated in. Kamala understood Chandra Midha was really wonderful and her laughter was not only music but also her voice was musical, a life free and fearless. It was something to be envied. Kamala enjoyed neither that health nor that freedom. From her narrow tradition-bound bylane she stared at Chandra Midha's unhampered highway. For the first time she had felt a trepidation, a secret shiver of fear. No one explained it to her but her feminine instinct seems to have read the situation all right.

That evening she prayed, 'O God, deliver me from this life!'

Interpretation of an event depended on one's point of view and the point of view was moulded by one's mood which in turn depended on several other factors.

Sometimes she recalled the events he narrated to her and his analysis of them. She was not illiterate even though she

hailed from a village. She had studied at the lower primary school, had read scriptures to please her mother, and had perused, for her own pleasure, novels that inspired one to look for a hero in life.

Looking anew at the past, she felt that Surababu had never loved her; he loved only himself and had used her as a colour to enjoy the sight of his self-love spread out.

At the beginning he had tried to educate her, but had failed and given up. He had taken her out only when obliged to do so, otherwise he sat lost behind his pile of books all the while.

The selfish meaning of his monologue came back anew to her: 'Only if someone was there to help me a bit, I could have gone much farther. Doing a D.Litt. would not have been that difficult!'

She remembered her cooking, her *paan*, her household worries, washing the kids—surely these were of little use for his D.Litt.

Well, now that a Chandra Midha had appeared in his life, let him work for a D.Litt. and have it.

How could she, a dwarf in knowledge, have done anything for him!

Often he gave his observations on womenfolk in our society: they were good housewives, but no good *sahadharmini*—partner in the husband's pursuit of his duty.

'Do you understand, Kamala,' he would say, '*Dharma* is not idol worship, it is one's activity according to one's ideal. If the husband is a doctor and the wife's *dharma* is the kitchen, do you think that makes for a good partnership?'

She also recalled his comments on life and society with literature as his yardstick to judge them.

'Look at the ethics. Clever ones have interpreted them to suit their own interest. They hide their lies, their false pretences behind their ethics. They don't have any faith in their hearts, but the name of Rama is always on their lips.

Our womenfolk are never tired of vaunting their ethics, but live in the dark, narrow cubicles of the mind. Trying to be careful, they end up being selfish; sometimes the fool passes off as the catholic. And those who revel in sordid rumours and whose imaginations run amuck put on dazzling vermilion marks on their foreheads and wear a brooch with 'husband is the greatest guru' inscribed on it. True ethics does not consist in merely reserving one's body for the husband while letting the mind wallow in filth.'

To all this she had nodded. He must, after all, be right. All that must be in the books he teaches. She never questioned the relevance of such doctrines in practice.

Bisibabu, a senior scholar, often used to come to consult his 'Sir'. Handsome, with his bushy eyebrows ranged above his eye-glasses, he was a lovable person, ever smiling, bright and exuding a sort of familiarity. One always felt comfortable and happy in his presence. Sometimes when Bisi was closeted with Surababu she had brought in tea and snacks for them. But suddenly one day, Surababu poured venom against him; 'Don't trust that guy, a veritable devil under a sweetmask. Don't forget.'

Since then she never even appeared before Bisi.

He had such complaints against many other people. Kamala now recollected, he had always something bad to whisper against so many of the familiar faces.

Kamala now read his nature in a new light. He had mastered her mind and had put shackles on her feet, but perhaps he never trusted her.

And these are known as ethics, affection, togetherness. An empty co-existence, gilded by illusions. Life had taken a backward stride and she would never regain her adolescent days.

Sometimes she felt like blurting out: 'Sure enough, your globe-trotting Chandra Midha has seen so much, knows so much that her mind cannot but be broad, unlike ours. And,

she has no husband, no son, she does not depend on someone else for a living. Why should she fear anyone?'

But she held back the surging words. Always she recalled his anxiety-ridden face, his sleepless nights. Was it not only for her? The memory of the spring of yesteryears always put her with her husband on a swing where there was no envy, no meanness, but only bathing in the blessings of flower-petals.

'Let him be happy, let everyone be happy, let my life's lamp burn out before him, but let him continue in happiness.'

It was as if the body was dying away slowly from the feet upward. Like an empty vessel, the mind resonated even with a slight touch. She felt that the body and the mind were not only mutually dependent but both were prisoners in the grip of time.

She had danced uncontrollably, not the dance of youth but of a half-dead leaf trembling precariously on a branch in the cold northern wind. A dance bereft of hope or any pining for forgiveness.

How could she forgive another when she wanted to die, not prepared to forgive even herself?

How healthy he is even now! Like a rock shedding the last drop of the lashing rain with ease, he had stood unaffected by ordeals. Time had rolled by; they had grown older and poorer, but he too had marched forward and had enviably kept his head high. Their three children had been well-placed in life. Even now he would get up in the morning, do his exercises and go for a constitutional.

The earth in the morning would lie open before him and the sky would be a page of poetry.

He continued to combine his studies with the practice of sitar late into the night.

And her world? One of suffering and pain, a scorched mind, a little bed and all the movement confined to crawling to the toilet and back. There was a hedge of small and big

trees beyond the window and at some distance the back of a house. Leaning on them was the curve of the sky. The water-towers, the chimneys of a sugar mill, the tall trees and buildings of different heights cut the sky in a haphazard manner.

The lonely, empty sky. Would she go there? When? But inside the body the last drop of vitality still insists on living, to see the changing seasons, the familiar crows, the house-sparrows, the kites; their movements and changing moods. And when the sky looked deep blue and the drum-stick tree bent down with flowers, she tended to forget her disease. She called out to Indira, 'How beautiful are these drum-stick leaves and flowers! Why don't you cook them for Babu? He loves them, you know!'

The sound of a human voice outside brought her happiness. When it was loneliness all around she felt the coolness of a dew-fall inside her chest.

Tears trickled down her eyes.

Like a lunatic or a weakling suddenly inspired to strength when angered or envious, she gathered strength from her sense of being ignored and lost. With effort she brought her endless coughing to a close. And she knew that it was foolish to expect the healthy ones to look after the invalid all the time. That would be a deception, an illusion.

That is why she would tell him now and then, 'I have become a burden to you. Please marry again.' And the reply always was, 'Please keep quiet. Are you mad? Won't people laugh at this?'

She was, indeed, losing her sanity since the coming of this Usharani. Surababu insisted on calling her by this name instead of her original name. Her name, in different contexts, came up everyday. He sang her praise in various tunes.

And lying in her bed Kamala would realise that a healthy man looked only at the rising sun.

She often repeated that the desires of the flesh are a mistake, a delusion.

Her attendant Indira alone listened to her. 'This is the way of the world, Indira, never trust a man!' Indira hardly understood the significance of that statement, but he had an instinctive wrath against the male sex. How much he wished that he were born a woman!

He would say, 'You will recover sister!'

The two decrepit boats touched each other through inadequate words and then floated apart. Kamala derived some peace from her loneliness.

But she noticed the changing mood of her husband and marked how he looked brighter day by day. His face and his eyes betrayed rejuvenation. Sometimes he kept quiet as if under a spell; sometimes he gave causeless starts.

His sitar played a new music. He returned late from the college and then went for a walk after dark.

In the beginning he used to inform her, 'I have to be with Chandra Midha for a while to discuss a paper in comparative linguistics.' Then he began avoiding her name. But he spent more and more time outside the home.

Nobody had told her anything, but Kamala understood that life will triumph over death, the healthy and the beautiful will dislodge the dead.

Surababu exuded that fragrance once again; he was out on a stroll once again.

What was that streak of fire on the horizon? The round large moon rose, beaming. Even the drum-stick tree looked like a beauty in its haze.

She too once hoped, and desired to be like that.

Suddenly, she felt gigantic waves of a tide which rolled over her entire consciousness.

She had found something. She had something to say.

But she was unable to articulate it in words. In any case it was useless.

Yet her mouth remained half open.

Surababu returned at half past nine. He too was thinking of life all the way. He felt certain that life and happiness were inseparable. So too were death, misery and narrowness.

Kamala lay, face upward and bent towards the moon. The mouth was slightly open; she had not been able to say what she wanted to say.

Translated from the Oriya by
SITAKANT MAHAPATRA

Setting Out in the Sun

S. Tamil Selvan

Attal was taken aback. She hadn't the faintest idea as to why this donkey of a girl had rushed all the way in the still heat of the day. When she asked about son-in-law, the girl gesticulated to her to wait, rushed inside, drank two small potfulls of water in urgent gulps and sat down, exhausted.

'Where is your husband?'

'He. . . . said he'll come here in the evening around the time we put rice to boil. It isn't good for business, he says, to come now.'

'Well, you might as well have come when the shadows begin to lengthen. Why run all the way in this hell-fire of a heat?'

'Mm, I'm told Macchan is here for *pongal*.'

So that was it. Her Macchan—Attal's only brother's son—had come from town to attend the Kali temple *pongal*. And the donkey had braved the sun, knowing it.

'Did you or did you not bother to swallow some *kanji* before you started?'

The donkey said, 'No'. Attal poured some *kanji* for her, muttering angrily. Her eyes clouded as she took in the parched lips, the bare neck and ears and the darkened skin of her daughter.

It had been known to every one that Mariammal would be married off to Tangarasu Macchan. As children, the two always stuck to each other, be it a game of Thief-Police or a venture into the jungle to pick strange fruits. Attal hadn't been the least upset at the way things had worked out. She'd had such wonderful dreams for her child. . .

'Where is Annan?' she broke in.

'He's gone to town to get rice and dal to be cooked specially for you and son-in-law.'

Mariammal finished the *kanji* and sped off to see Cheeniyammal who had sent her news of Macchan's arrival through the boys who went to town to work in the match factory. She could scarcely get a hold on herself since that moment and had wanted to rush home that very instant. But her husband would have none of it. There was no need to, he told her, when the festival was still a full two days away. And she did go every other day, didn't she, just because home was only a three mile distance, always carrying a little something or the other from the shop. This was quite irksome, for the shop earned him but little. And now it was the temple *pongal* festival that beckoned her. Somehow he never could bring himself to be blunt and tell her off. He was wont to whine a protest or two and in the end let her go.

Mariammal was least affected by his protests. As soon as the thought occurred her, she would be on her feet and set for home. And now with Macchan back home, it was almost beyond her to stay away.

After all, hadn't she grown up from childhood with the certainty that she was to belong to Tangarasu Macchan. When Macchan's father was transferred to Pudukottai and the family moved out, she howled so much that the older women still

recalled it and laughed aloud. I too must go, she had screamed flailing her limbs, rolling on the street. 'Girl, when is the husband coming?' she was often teased. But for her it wasn't a joke, she took it in earnest. She would keep herself aloof from the happy crowd that splashed in the canal water for she feared developing rashes; and that her town-bred Macchan certainly would not like. And what if he refused to marry her, she would think for a heart-stopping second, were she to put on weight around the belly, which she might, thanks to a diet of *kanji*.

But once she grew up, she became too shy to even think of Macchan whose name had sat so lightly on her lips till the other day. That was so for a few days Macchan soon reappeared in her thoughts, now with new dreams that set her heart aflutter. When she went to town to work in the match factory, she would be full of thoughts about Macchan, and would remain so every moment of her work. Perhaps Macchan would disapprove of her lack of education. Had Ayya not been forced to go to work in Tanjavur during the famine, where he succumbed to dysentery, she too would have studied making her a suitable match without a doubt.

But her doubt was set at rest when Macchan came home with his sister Gomati's wedding invitation. Her heart swelled with pride as she secretly observed Macchan from the door slit, talking to Attal and Annan, just like old times, giving himself no airs whatsoever.

Every bit of news about Macchan was a gem locked away in the safety of her heart. Thoughts of Macchan remained steadfast as the years rolled by, even as starvation stared them in their faces after Ayya's death. One day it became clear that she would not wed Tangarasu Macchan. Attal and Annan became too bitter and put paid to past hopes and memories. But not Mariammal.

She recalled it well—the rage that Annan got into once uncle and aunt left, after inviting them to Tangarasu's

marriage, when they had all the while been waiting for their arrival with a bride-price for Mariammal. Rather unfeelingly, uncle told Annan to call on them at least a week before the wedding, to give them a generous helping hand, like he had done at Gomati's marriage. The moment uncle's back was turned Annan burst out in front of Attal. What precisely did they take him to be, an idiot? Well, he did help out at Gomati's marriage. His sister belonged to that family and he did what was expected of a brother. But whoever expected an uncle to fetch a girl from strangers, for the sake of a few pieces of jewellery. Annan would have nothing more to do with uncle or Macchan after that day.

To begin with Attal had shouted down Annan. Who are you to shout she'd told him. 'Was it their fault if you'd imagined that an educated employed young man would marry a donkey of a girl who came home stinking from a match factory?' she asked him angrily. But as night fell she rent her heart out and lamented all over again for her dead husband. Her voice rang out in a wail, 'My raja. . .my master. . . you left me alone. . . you who claimed my hand as the rightful suitor. . .wresting me from another. . . when I was all but his. . . why am I forsaken today with none to care for me. . . did I not love my younger brother. . . did I not care for him. . . did I not nurture him. . . my raja. . . is there none for me on this earth. . . ?'

The neighbourhood women were angered by the lament. 'We understand you. . . a woman, all said and done. . . But should you be lamenting the way you are?' It was only when Annan came home and scolded her that she quietened down.

The following day Annan announced that nobody would attend the wedding. Attal did not demur. She declared that she had no more to do with the brother or his son. But not so Mariammal. She begged and pleaded with Attal and Annan and in the end declared that she would take her life

if nobody would go. At last Annan agreed but he wouldn't utter a word about the wedding to Mariammal or Attal beyond a dry remark that it had gone off as usual. That hardly deterred Mariammal. Even as her hands busied themselves preparing the match-heads, her imagination filled out the umpteen details of Macchan's marriage. Well, she would pray even as her eyes brimmed and an ache was felt in the region of her heart, that Macchan should be happy and live well.

Annan wasted no time at all in settling her marriage once he returned from Macchan's wedding. He wouldn't rest till he found a groom for her. He chose a relation of Ayya's, living in Mavilpatti. The young man had served in Madras in a shop owned by a Nagalapuram nadar. Annan sold off four sovereigns of gold saved for Mariammal and set up a shop for him in Mavilpatti itself.

And here she was despite everything that happened, all eyes and ears for her Macchan, who had arrived here for the temple festival. She had to know how Macchan was, how Akkal was and how the two got along. But she decided to wait till evening for it was likely that they were resting through the hot afternoon.

She found Macchan leaning on the cot chatting with grandfather. She uttered a quick greeting in his direction and ran toward the inner quarter, her heart beating fast. Tangarasu's mother and Akkal were busy in the kitchen. Nothing was remiss in Ponnattal's affection as she received her. Akka was undoubtedly attractive. But she wasn't wearing much gold, as she had expected. Perhaps she'd taken them off. Mariammal spoke to her with immense warmth of feeling, casting affectionate glances at her all the while. Ponnattal got up in the middle to do a spot of shopping, telling the two of them to carry on. Mariammal moved closer to Akka and took her hands with affection. In a low voice full of love she asked '. . . . Akka. . .are you with child. . .?'

Akka shot back, with a sneering expression 'Yes. . . that's the last thing that's missing.' Mariammal was stung to the quick. Akka's lips were no doubt stretched in a smile but not so her words—they held out a hate that was beyond her endurance.

She quickly made for the backyard on the pretext of washing her plate. With an effort she checked the strong emotions that assailed her. Soon she heard Macchan's affectionate voice. 'Has Mariammal left?. . . Did you offer her coffee, Janu?' Akka shot back, mocking. 'But of course! And such concern! Get a hold on yourself or you may be swept off your own feet.' It was a low voice but terse, very terse. And the words seemed soaked in hate.

Mariammal felt ill. Her head ached and her body felt feverish. She left the plate in the backyard from where she made for home and stretched herself muttering a brief word about her aching head to Attal and Annan. Her mind recalled the picture of a sorry-looking Tangarasu facing uncle as he returned late from the jungle after plucking fruit. Mariammal gulped down mouthfuls of water but the burning sensation in her chest refused to disappear. She felt troubled by Cheeniyammal's report that Akka was being maltreated by Tangarasu's mother over the quantity of gold she'd brought. And Akka's bitter expression. . . the sting in her words. . . .

In the evening the entire village went to the temple precincts to cook the ceremonial *pongal* but she kept to herself and continued to lie down. She recalled everyone, everything, one by one—their childhood, Ayya, Attal, Annan, their trouble-torn existence, even Akka—and a tide of sorrow overwhelmed her.

It was late in the evening when her husband arrived. He'd had good business, he said, having sold thirty-two coconuts. In fact he had to turn down the last few customers not having even fried gram to sell. As he went on happily recounting his day's successes it suddenly struck him that

Mariammal was sitting utterly silent. He grabbed at her hair and gave her a vigorous shaking. 'You wretch! Here I go on and on at the top of my voice and there you are, all stone.'

He was startled by the huge convulsive sobs that came out of her as he did that. He tried hard to console her and pleaded again and again to forgive him. It was a mistake, he said, to have pulled her hair. But her tears kept flowing. As though a dam had broken, its waters in a constant swell. Her body was racked by violent shivers and sobs that seemed to explode from the depths. He imagined that his words had been much too harsh and he continued to cajole her.

Translated from the Tamil by
M. VIJAYALAKSHMI

Housewife

Ismat Chughtai

The day Mirza's new maid ambled into his house, there was a sensation in the neighbourhood. The sweeper, who normally avoided work, stayed on and scrubbed the floor with great vigour. The milkman, notorious for adulterating his ware, brought milk clogged with cream.

Who could have named her Lajo the coy one? Bashfulness was unknown to Lajo. No one knew who begot her and abandoned her on the streets to a lonely weeping childhood. Begging and starving, she reached an age when she could snatch a living for herself. Youth etched her body into bewitching curves and this became her only asset. The street initiated her into the mysteries of life.

She never haggled. If it was not a cash-down proposition, it would be sex on credit. If the lover had no means, she would even give of herself free.

'Aren't you ashamed of yourself?' people asked.

'I am!' Lajo would blush brazenly.

'You'll regret it some day.'

'I couldn't care less!'

How could she? With a face that was innocence itself, dark eyes, evenly set teeth, a mellow complexion and a gait so swinging, so provocative?

Mirza was a bachelor. Flattening and baking *chapatis* daily had flattened out his existence. He owned a small grocery shop which he pompously called General Store. The shop did not give any leisure to Mirza even to go to his home town and get married.

Mirza's friend Bakshi deposited her at Mirza's. Instead of squandering away at brothels, he thought, why not let Mirza enjoy a free dish?

'God forbid, I won't have a tart in the house!' said Mirza warily. 'Take her back!'

But Lajo had already made herself at home. With her skirt hiked up like a diaper, broom in hand, she was sweeping Mirza's house in dead earnest. When Bakshi informed her of Mirza's refusal, it fell on deaf ears. She ordered him to arrange the pans on the kitchen shelf and went out to fetch water. 'If you wish, I'll take you back home,' Bakshi said.

'Out with you! Are you my husband to leave me back at my mother's? Go! I'll tackle the Mian myself!'

Bakshi's departure left Mirza helpless. He ran out and took refuge in the mosque. He was not prepared to incur this extra expenditure. Moreover, she was bound to pilfer and cheat. What a mess Bakshi had got him into!

But on returning home he held his breath. As though his late mother, Bi Amma, was back! The house was sparkling.

'Shall I serve dinner, Mian?' Lajo asked and disappeared into the kitchen.

Spinach and potato curry, *moong ki dal* fried with onion and garlic—just the way Ammaji used to cook!

'How did you manage all this?' Mirza asked, baffled.

'Borrowed from the *bania*.'

'Look, I'll pay you return fare. I just cannot afford a servant.'

'Who wants to be paid?'

'But. . .'

'Is the food hot?' Lajo asked, slipping a fresh *chapati* into his plate.

'Not the food but I am certainly hot from top to toe!' Mirza wanted to shout as he went into his room to sleep.

'No, Mian, I am here for good!' Lajo threatened when he brought up the question again the next morning.

'But. . .'

'Didn't you like the food?'

'It's not that. . . .'

'Don't I scrub and clean well?'

'It's not that. . . .'

'Then what is it?' Lajo flared up.

She had fallen in love, not with Mirza, but with the house. Bakshi, the bastard, had once rented a room for her. Its previous occupant had been Nandi—a buffalo. The buffalo was dead and gone to hell but had left behind his stench. And Bakshi did not treat her well either. Now here she was, the unrivalled mistress of Mirza's house! Mirza was uncomplicated. He would speak softly and quietly, and eat whatever was served.

Mirza, for his part, checked the accounts a few times and was satisfied that Lajo did not cheat.

At times she went across to Ramu's grandmother for a tete-a-tete. Ramu was Mirza's dissipated teenaged help in the store. He fell for Lajo the minute he saw her. It was he who told her of Mirza's frequent visits to the singing girls.

This hurt Lajo. After all, what was she for? Wherever employed, she had served well in every capacity. And here a full chaste week had passed! She had never felt so unwanted before. Several offers came her way but she was Mirza's

maid. She rejected one and all, lest Mirza should become a laughing-stock. And here was Mirza, an iceberg, or so he appeared. Lajo could not see the volcanoes erupting within him. He kept away from home deliberately.

Lajo's name was on every lip—today she slapped the milkman, yesterday she had aimed a dung-cake full in the face of the *bania* and so on. The school-master insisted on educating her. The Mullaji of the mosque burst into prayers in Arabic, beseeching God to ward off impending danger!

Mirza came home annoyed. Lajo had just had her bath. Strands of wet hair clung to her shoulders. Blowing into the kitchen fire had flushed her cheeks and filled her eyes with water. She ground her teeth at Mian's untimely entry.

Mirza almost toppled over! After a silent, uneasy meal, he picked up his walking-stick, went out and sat in the mosque. But he could not relax. Ceaseless thoughts of home made him restless. Unable to hold out any longer, he got back and found Lajo on the threshold, quarrelling with a man. The man slinked away the moment he saw Mirza.

'Who was that?' Mirza's tone was that of a suspicious husband!

'Raghava!'

'Raghava?' Mirza had been buying milk from him for years and yet did not know his name.

'Shall I prepare the *hookah*, Mian?' Lajo changed the subject.

'No! What was that man up to?'

'Was asking me how much milk he should bring from now on.'

'What did you say?'

'I said: May God hasten your funeral! Bring the usual measure.'

'Then?' Mirza was furious.

'Then I said: Bastard, go, feed the extra milk to your mother and sister!'

'The scoundrel! Don't let him set foot here again! I'll myself fetch milk on the way home from the store.'

That night, after dinner, Mirza put on a starched, freshly laundered *kurta*, stuck a scented piece of cottonwool in an ear, picked up his walking-stick and walked out.

Jealousy wrung Lajo's heart. She cursed the singing-girl and sat dumb-founded. Was Mirza really indifferent to her? 'How could that be?' she wondered.

The singing-girl was haggling with a customer. This upset Mirza. He turned away and made for Lala's shop. There, he vented his anger on inflation, rising prices, national politics. . . and returned home at midnight, spent and irritated. He drank a lot of cold water but the fire in him continued to blaze.

A part of Lajo's smooth golden leg was visible from the open door. A careless turn in her sleep tinkled her anklets. Mirza drained another glass of water and bundled up on his cot, cursing everything under the moon.

Ceaseless tossing in bed reduced his body to a blister. Litres of cold water bloated his stomach. The roundness of the leg behind the door was irresistible. Unknown fears strangled him. But the devil egged him on. From his bed to the kitchen, he had walked so many miles but now he couldn't move a step.

Then a very innocent idea crossed his mind. Were Lajo's leg not so exposed he wouldn't be so uncomfortable... Gradually, this idea took strength and so did Mirza. What if she woke up? Yet he had to take the risk—for the sake of his own safety.

He felt for his slippers under the cot, held his breath and tiptoed across, gingerly lifted the hem of the skirt and pulled it down slowly. He stood awhile, indecisively and turned away.

With one quick move, Lajo grabbed him. Mirza was speechless. He was never so wrong in life before. He struggled, pleaded but Lajo wouldn't let him go!

When he encountered Lajo the next morning, she blushed like a bride! Lajo, the victor, went about her chores boldly, humming a *kajri*. Not a shadow of the night's happening flickered in her eyes. When Mirza sat down to breakfast, she sat on the doorstep, as usual, fanning the flies away.

That afternoon, when she brought his lunch to the shop he noticed a new lilt in her gait. Whenever Lajo came to the shop, people would stop by and enquire about the prices of groceries. She sold in a short while what Mirza couldn't during the entire day!

Mirza began to improve in his looks. People knew the reason and sizzled with envy. Mirza, in turn, grew nervous and ill at ease. The more Lajo looked after him, the more he was enamoured of her and the more afraid he was of the neighbours. She was utterly brazen. When she fetched his lunch, the entire bazaar throbbed with her presence.

'Don't bring lunch any more!' he told her one day.

'Why not?' Lajo's face fell. Staying home all by herself bored her. The bazaar was an interesting break.

Having stopped her from coming, many doubts assailed Mirza. He dropped in at odd hours to spy on her and she would insist on rewarding him fully for his attentions!

The day he caught her at a game of *kabaddi* with street urchins, his anger knew no bounds. Her skirt was billowing in the wind. The boys were engrossed in the skirt. Mirza passed by, holding his head high with affected indifference. His discomfiture amused the on-lookers.

Mirza had grown fond of Lajo. The very idea of separation drove him crazy. He was unable to concentrate on his shop. He feared that some day she might desert him.

'Mian, why not marry her?' Miran Mian suggested.

'God forbid!' he shouted. How could he form so sacred a relationship with a slut?

But that very evening, when he didn't find her at home, Mirza felt lost. The confounded Lala had been long in

waiting. He had offered her a bungalow! Miran Mian, a friend from all accounts, had himself made a proposition to Lajo on the sly.

Mirza was losing hope when suddenly Lajo appeared. She had just gone across to Ramu's grandmother!

That day Mirza made up his mind to take Lajo for a wife even at the cost of his family's pride and prestige.

'But why, Mian?' Lajo asked, surprised at his proposal.

'Why not? Want to have a fling elsewhere?' he asked crossly.

'Why should I have a fling?'

'That Raoji is offering you a bungalow.'

'I wouldn't spit on his bungalow!'

But the need for marriage completely escaped her. She was and would be his for life. A master like him was not easy to come by. Lajo knew what a gem Mirza was. All her previous masters inevitably ended up as her lovers. They would first have their fill then beat her up and kick her out. Mirza had always been tender and loving. He had bought her a few clothes and a pair of gold bangles. No one in seven generations of Lajo's family had ever worn ornaments of pure gold.

When Mirza spoke of his plan to Ramu's grandmother, she too was surprised.

'Mian, why tie a bell around your neck?' she asked. 'Is the slut making a fuss? A sound thrashing will set her right. Where beating up can do, why think of marriage.'

But Mirza was obsessed with the idea.

'You there, are you hesitating on account of the difference in religion?' Ramu's grandmother asked Lajo.

'No, I've always regarded him as my husband.'

Lajo looked upon even a passing lover as a passing husband and served him well. Riches were never showered upon her, yet she gave of herself fully—body and soul. Mirza was an exception, of course. Only Lajo knew the pleasure of

the give-and-take game with him. Compared to him the others were pigs.

Also, marriage was for virgins. How did she qualify to be a bride? She begged and pleaded, but Mirza was bent upon entering into a legal contract of the *nikah*.

That day, after the evening prayer, the *nikah* was solemnised. Young girls of the neighbourhood sang wedding songs. Mirza entertained his friends. Lajo, renamed Kaneez Fatima, became the wife of Mirza Irgan Ali Beg.

Mirza imposed a ban on *lehngas* and prescribed *churidar* pyjamas. Lajo, however, was used to open space between her legs. This new imposition was a big irritant. She could never get used to it. One day, at the first opportunity, she took off the pyjamas and was about to get into the *lehnga*, when Mirza turned up. In her confusion, she forgot to hold the skirt around her waist and dropped it to the floor.

'The devil take you!' Mirza thundered a Quranic curse. He hurriedly threw a bedsheet over her.

Lajo could not understand his annoyance and the grandiloquent oration that followed. Where had she erred? This very act had taken Mirza's breath away so may times in the past. Now he was so upset. He picked up the *lehnga* and actually fed it to the fire.

Mirza left, leaving Lajo shocked and uncomprehending. Discarding the sheet, she examined her body. May be some repulsive skin disease had erupted overnight.

When bathing under the tap in the open, she kept wiping her tears. Mithwa, the son of the mason, climbed the terrace daily on the pretext of flying kites and watched her. She was so sad today she neither stuck out her thumb nor hurled a slipper at him. She wrapped the sheet around and went indoors.

With a heavy heart she got into the long trousers—as long as the devil's intestines. To add to her misery the *cummerbund* got lost inside the waist-band. She shouted for

help. Jullu, the neighbour's daughter, appeared and the tape was located. 'Which sadist could have adapted this rifle case for a feminine dress?' Lajo wondered.

Later, when Mirza returned home, the tape played truant once again. Lajo tried desperately to catch it with her fingers. Mirza found her nervousness endearing. After a combined concentrated chase, the tape was found.

But a ticklish problem popped up for Mirza. What used to be intoxicating coquetry in Lajo now turned to brazenness in his wife. The indecent ways of a flirt are unbecoming to respectable women. Lajo failed to be the bride of his dreams—one who would blush at his amorous advances, be annoyed at his persistence and feign indifference to his attentions. Lajo was a mere pavement slab.

Checking her at every step, Mirza curbed her excesses and tamed the wild in her—or so he thought. Also, he was no longer impatient to get back home in the evenings. Like all husbands, he spent more time with friends to avoid being labelled henpecked.

To make up for his frequent absences, he suggested engaging a maid. Lajo was furious. She knew of Mian's renewed visits to the singing-girls. She also knew that every man of the neighbourhood went there. But, in her own home, she would not tolerate another woman! Let anybody step into her kitchen and tinker with her glistening vessels, Lajo would tear her to bits! She would share Mirza with another woman but certainly would not share the home.

Mirza seemed to have installed Lajo in his house and forgotten all about her. For weeks he spoke only in monosyllables. When she was his mistress, all men had had their eyes on her. Now that she had gained respectability, she became 'mother, sister and daughter'. No one cast even a stray glance at the jute curtain—except the faithful Mithwa. He still flew kites on the roof, although only when Mirza was away and Lajo was bathing in the courtyard.

One night Mirza stayed away, celebrating Dussehra with friends. He came home the next morning, had a quick wash and went off to the shop. Lajo was annoyed. It was then, while bathing, that her glance climbed up the terrace. Or maybe that day Mithwa's stares pierced her wet body like so many spears.

Suddenly his kite snapped. The broken cord brushed sharply against Lajo's body. Lajo was startled. She got up quickly and ran into a room, absent-mindedly or deliberately forgetting to wrap the towel around her.

From then on, Mithwa was always found hanging around Mirza's house. Whenever Lajo wanted something from the market, she would draw the jute curtain aside and shout 'Mithwa, don't stay put like a dunghill! Get us a few *kachoris*.'

If Mithwa did not appear on the terrace during her bath, she rattled the bucket loud enough to wake a corpse in its grave. The love, of which she had given so lavishly all her life, was now Mithwa's for the asking. If Mirza did not turn up for a meal, she would never waste the food but feed someone poor and needy. Who was needier than Mithwa?

Mirza was convinced that, chained down to wedlock, Lajo had become a genuine housewife. Had he not seen for himself, he would never have believed it. Seeing him on the doorstep so unexpectedly, she gave out a peal of laughter. She could not, even in her wildest dreams, imagine that Mirza would be so offended!

But Mithwa knew. Clutching his *dhoti* firmly with one hand, he bolted and stopped for breath only after he had crossed three villages! Mirza flogged Lajo so much that, had she been made of softer stuff, she would have breathed her last.

The news that Mirza had caught his wife with Mithwa spread throughout the village. People came in large numbers to watch the fun and were sorely disappointed to know that Mithwa, the hero, had fled and that the wife lay dismantled. Ramu's grandmother arrived and gathered her away.

One would think a flogging like that would turn Lajo against the very idea of Mirza. Far from it! Beating helped achieve what marriage could not. The bond was stronger. The minute she came to, Lajo enquired after Mirza. All her masters inevitably ended up as lovers. After giving her a sound thrashing, the question of pay was set aside. She slogged free and was beaten from time to time. But Mirza had always been good. Other masters had even 'loaned' her to friends but Mirza regarded her as his own. Everyone advised her to run away and save her skin but she did not budge.

How was Mirza to face the world? He saw no way but to kill her in order to save his honour. Miran Mian held him back. 'Why must you stick your head in the noose for a bitch? Divorce the whore and forget her!'

Mirza divorced Lajo then and there and sent thirty-two rupees of dower, *mahr*, her clothes and other belongings over to Ramu's grandmother.

When Lajo heard of the divorce, she heaved a sigh of relief. *Nikah* had proved unlucky. All mishaps had been due to that.

'Is Mian still angry?' she asked Ramu's grandmother.

'Shan't set eyes on you. Wants you to get lost! Drop dead!'

The news of Mirza's divorce rocked the village. Lala sent out a feeler: 'The bungalow is ready!'

'Dump your mother in it!' Lajo retorted.

After a fortnight in bed, Lajo was up on her feet again. The beating seemed to have spring-cleaned her and left her more glowing than ever. When buying *paan* or *kachori*, she took the whole bazaar by storm.

Mirza died a thousand deaths. Once he spotted her at the *bania's*, arguing over something. The *bania* drooled. Mirza slinked away, avoiding notice.

'You are crazy, Mian! Why care for what she does? You have divorced her, haven't you?' Miran Mian asked.

'She has been my wife.'

'If you want the truth, she was never your wife!'

'What about the *nikah*?'

'Thoroughly illegal!'

'How?'

'It was never valid. No one knows who begot her. And, I suppose, *nikah* with a bastard is not valid,' Miran Mian passed the verdict.

'So the *nikah* never came into effect?' Mirza asked.

'Never!' confirmed Miran Mian.

'And I never lost face either? My family's reputation is intact!'

Mirza felt immensely relieved. 'But what about the divorce?' he asked, worried.

'My dear Mian, no *nikah*, no divorce.'

'So the thirty-two rupees were wasted!' Mirza said sorrowfully. In no time, news went bouncing all over the neighbourhood that Mirza was never married to his 'wife', that the *nikah* and divorce had both been unlawful.

When Lajo heard the news she danced with joy. The nightmare that was her marriage and divorce was over. What made her happiest was the fact that Mian had not lost face, after all. She had been genuinely grieved that he had lost his honour because of her. 'What a boon it is to be a bastard,' she thought. God forbid, were she a legitimate child. . . Even the idea of such a possibility made her shudder.

Lajo was feeling suffocated at Ramu's grandmother's. Thoughts of the house kept her worried. Mian could not have had it swept and dusted for fear of theft. The place must be in a mess.

One day Mirza was on his way to the shop when Lajo waylaid him.

'Mian, shall I resume duty from tomorrow?'

'Damn', said Mirza and walked away briskly. 'But I'll

need a maid sooner or later,' he thought. 'May be this wretch if none other.'

Lajo did not wait for Mirza to make up his mind. She jumped into the house from the roof, tied up her *lehnga* and set to work.

That evening, on his return, Mirza held his breath. It was like the late Bi Amma come back! The house was sparkling clean. A faint smell of incense filled the air. The pitcher was filled with water and over that was placed a well-scrubbed bowl.

Mirza's heart went heavy with nostalgia. He ate the roast mutton and *paranthas* in hushed silence. As usual Lajo sat on the doorstep, fanning the flies away.

At night, when she spread jute curtains on the kitchen floor and went to sleep, Mirza once again had a severe bout of thirst. He tossed and turned, listening to the provocative tinkle of her anklets. Fear clutched at his heart, as also a feeling of guilt. He felt he had been very unfair to her and had grossly underestimated the poor creature. A deep sense of regret overtook him. He lay cursing himself.

Then with a sudden 'Damn it all,' he got up, ran across and collected the housewife from the mat.

Translated from the Urdu by
FATIMA AHMAD

Weekend

Nirmal Verma

She raised the quilt off her face, lingering between sleep and wakefulness. The kisses of the receding night stuck like chunks between her teeth. She caressed them with the tip of her tongue, rolled them over in her mouth and bit, but no blood oozed out. All her blood had pooled round the rose between her thighs, the dark triangle wet with perspiration. She weaved her legs in between his, calling out to him softly. The intoxication of his touch, that which galloped like a stag within her, chased gilded illusions, endlessly, futilely.

She stretched out her arms, nestled his head on her breasts and opened her eyes. The dawn outside stretched like a grey cloud across the window. The three poplar trees which swayed in the breeze at night now stood still: leafless, dark silhouettes. These I'll remember, she told herself, these poplar trees, this pale morning. She held his face midway as it stole down her belly on its quest. . . And what else shall I remember? After the trees, this gallop of the deer inside

me, the ice-cream cone, and a clean sun-washed slice of pain glittering in the grass. She took his earlobe between her lips and let his excitement trickle into her mouth.

When the alarm clock rang it startled them both, arresting the fluid motion of their bodies. It's nothing much when you are asleep, but when awake it sounds like an alarm, a warning, a little insistent animal screaming in the darkness of the room. Her hands upon him went numb. For a long moment after the clock gasped out its last note, it didn't quite seem dead: it had stopped to recover its breath and would get going again. Finally she gathered enough courage to press down the alarm button. Only, by then it wasn't necessary.

The clock had spent itself but she had not yet begun. She opened her eyes, touched the man by her side and took a cigarette from under the pillow, as though these preparatory actions would set her going. If you are in your own room and have slept in your own bed it isn't difficult to take up from where you left off at night. But in another person's room everything remains frozen, incomplete, something like a picture frame awaiting the picture or a first draft awaiting the precision of a cohesive meaning. The disorderly pile of her clothes, a glass half-full of water, his naked arms—these with their burden of desire linked her with the night. She stared at them and thought: when he wakes up, he'll find me gone; I'll be at the far shore of the night and I'll call out to him, back here, to this shore where we are not strangers, where we know each other well.

Slowly she got out of bed. She stood before the mirror. Each morning revives anew the courage to go on. She put on her clothes, glanced at herself in the mirror and chose a lipstick to go with the hue that rose on the crest of the morning light. This she did always, in her room. But in his room his presence seemed to wind itself round her, layer on layer, and she came undone. 'This is our home', he would say 'and you are mine.' There was no home anywhere;

therefore his 'our' had a magical sound and the splendour of sunshine. 'You are mine', he said, and the sun reached out across the dense jungle where she stood, alone, in front of the mirror, choosing her lipstick.

* * *

Together they walked to the railway station. They spent their weekends in another city nearby. Once in the train they felt they had always been living together. He rested his head on her shoulder while she looked out. Close by lay the kit of toys, bread, biscuits and a sleeping-bag. Sometimes his mouth left its resting place on her shoulder and stole up her neck, obliterating consciousness of all but the fire of his lips.

These days they had to themselves. Out in the street people thought she was lonely and alone. She walked her way and no one could have guessed she was returning, not going away. Returning to her marginal life, dozing in the sun, and. . . And then she would stop in her tracks and think of the night they had shared together, another night that would come the next week, next Saturday, Sunday—as if these were the only words the wheels of the train beat out one after the other. Strange, isn't it, she thought, how the words rise, as they would when she was a child, from the wheels and then go down again, dying.

No one dies. Things return from the brink. Nor does the day ever come to an end. The same hour returns the next day, panting, to sit at one's feet, like a pet dog broken loose from its chain after having disappeared into the dark night. Like this day, captive in a railway compartment, with him, his eyelids drooping with sleep and the sun. Those half-closed eyes on which my lips would have closed if so many people hadn't been around. Can they know that this man with his dozing head on my shoulder was on me last night, with an ocean stirring inside, surging forth, and he, a splinter of driftwood, rising on its waves, falling, dying?

No, no one dies. Not even the sign that comes up on the wind. It stays. It beckons to me and I go running to him.

'Wait here', he said. 'I'll just be back.'

She watched him go out of the park. They had been sitting there, by the stadium, since their train journey. 'I sit on a bench', she mused, 'and all around me is the grass, this pale green grass. And the row of electric poles, and far in the distance the boarding house. I sit as if this were my Sunday picnic. Some words carry a whole atmosphere with them. One such word is picnic. It recalls to me the smell of burning leaves and laughter under the trees, the hum of descending darkness. . . This small miracle happened when we were on the train. I told him I wouldn't sit by myself on the bench this time, that he could bring his daughter out into the park and I'd watch them play together. She wouldn't have to know I came with her father. Only I'd know that. He needn't feel guilty about bringing another woman not his own—when he visited his daughter.

'You mean you won't mind it?'

'Why should I?', I said, laying my tired head on his shoulder.

Empty benches lay tier upon tier in the pavilion at the further end of the park, like those in a Roman amphitheatre. The red tin roof shone brightly in the sun. It was a day in March which sparkled the more as the sun rose.

She watched him go. Her heart went after him. 'I am here,' she repeated to herself like an incantation, 'I am here. He has come to see his daughter. They will play together till evening. I watch them play. We go back at night. I go at it again. He comforts me. He fills up the void within me even as it empties him.

'But this I didn't understand before. Then I'd importune him. Once I'd been with him in his room another five days my patience would have run out. How long shall we continue to see each other on the quiet, like thieves? Even thieves dare to come into the open sometimes. You must make up your mind

one way or the other. . . And before long I'd be tearing at my clothes in a fit of exasperation, like thwarted children running round the room. Everything in the room appeared to come at me, gnashing its teeth. I gnashed my teeth at everything. He'd be scared. I'd see him scared and I'd begin to cry. I'd be scared to see him scared. I'd be scared I might lose him like his wife had. "No", I'd mumble, "you're all right as you are." He'd draw me into his arms. We'd hold fast, desperately, to each other. We'd explore each other in places where ghosts dwelt. They quavered under my lips and chattering teeth. I'd taste him afresh. Together we clambered up heights. When he'd near the peak I'd catch up with him. There we'd lie a while at the top, cradled in each other's arms, alone the two of us, no ghosts any more, nor any rage, only the peace of silence. Afterwards, when we'd climbed down, I'd scrub myself with a towel where his desire wetted me. I scrubbed him also, his vulnerable body white like a child's, uninitiated, virginal-looking, inspite of a marriage behind him. It seemed incredible that other hands touched him before me, made love to him. Every crevice of my being haunted by her spectres is impaled on pain. I throw them all open. They come out.'

* * *

They came back. She saw them while they were still some distance away. Their voices rose on the breeze. Her heart sank. She got up from the bench. She sat down again. They were laughing. He was watching his daughter as she romped about, her ribbon blown high. A spot of blue, it approached her with the shifting circles of her run.

The girl suddenly froze, her breath held. The strained interval spun out to breaking point. She had seen her, a stranger, sitting on the bench, fixing her with an intent gaze. Her grip on her father's hand tightened. Her eyes lit up with more than the sun, shining with a startled light of their own.

Her gaze was still fastened on the girl. He stood behind his daughter. All around was the grass. At her back lay the emptiness of silence. It moved in closer and pressed on, confronting her as she sat on the bench. She made an effort to smile. The girl watched her struggle. Children terrified her. Particularly girls, for they might instinctively catch her out. In order that she could face up to her, look her straight in the eye, she repeated to herself the familiar charm: she is his daughter, this man's whom I love, whom I love dearly, whom I. . . She stopped. The words suddenly stood divested of their magic, naked in their inadequacy. There was no comfort in sight.

He whispered something in the girl's ear. Perhaps he told her that the woman sitting on the bench was not a stranger, that she was known to him, and she should not be afraid. But the girl continued to stare at her, some deep thought knitting her brows. Her strained breathing eased somewhat, though. It struck her that even though the girl was so small, she had her own terms to go by. She stood up for them in all her aloneness. As alone as she was herself. Out on the battleground. Neither needed to offer any concession to the other.

The March breeze blew over the tree tops. Grass, which lay subdued under their shadows, turned to sunshine. They left the woman alone. He was playing with his daughter. They were running among the dunes. At some distance slanted the red roof of the pavilion with the green-painted benches under it. And there were all those trees over which the breeze blew.

'Bored, are you?'

'He has left his daughter to come to me, as if suddenly reminded of my existence. I look up at him in surprise. I draw him from where he is within his world to my world of pain and he comes scrambling. The girl looks on, wide-eyed. "No", I say. I let go his hand. "No, I am not bored. I am all right. You go play with her. I am comfortable—really." '

She made herself comfortable, stretched out in the sleeping-bag on the bench. Her hands were out to shell peanuts, and her eyes to see them both play, and to see his part of the pillow which was open to the breeze. The breeze filled it and it fluttered. The no-smell of the smell of his hair lingered on it. 'I reach out my hand. Slowly my fingers close round it. . . No, let go. Open your fist. It's an open day. You're so open-hearted. You can go anywhere you like in this wide open world.

'How easy! I shove away *that* part of the sleeping bag. I see them. They are outside me. He buys ice-cream, one cone for the girl, another for me. For a moment the distance between us disappears. We've stepped across it! We could be friends! Ice-cream smudges her mouth. He laughs happily at her. I wipe her mouth. She looks up at me. A strange fear still peeps out of her eyes. She wants to be friends with me but can't get over her fear. Coward! I suppress my anger and pull the thorn of fear out of her. Then I see. I see her soul splashed with red blood. And just as quickly I put the thorn back. She goes back into herself. I go back to my place. Alone, once again. Shivering, despite the March sun. I pull the sleeping bag round me.

'How easy! I can go anywhere. Every path is open to me. I have no encumbrances, unlike him—a separated wife, a child with attachments and me in-between. Filling the emptiness. Like the air which resides even in desolate corners of the earth. And when the world lays claim to the space it doesn't complain. It leaves, goes somewhere else.

'But I'll not go anywhere. My place is here, in this corner of the park, under the bright open sky, their voices rippling over the breeze to me. This is my weekend, of which no one can deprive me. I've learnt to receive that man in me, like little children learn walking. But this is no learning. Suddenly one day the knees are up in the air. His presence crowds out the five-day-of-the-week vacuity. Empty

himself, he fills me and in the process is himself filled. What would it have been like had we lived together under the same roof? Then perhaps there wouldn't have been the fear of falling, hurting my knees, the awareness of a sprawling emptiness within. And then would I have learnt either? I'm not so sure. Now even as I stand still I feel I'm walking alongside him. And when I do walk by his side I find I've hardly moved.'

But they had. They had gone over to the merry-go-round. Their voices did not carry now, only some shouts rose above the rustling of the leaves. They sat astride the horses, those red and blue painted horses of wood along with the motor cars and aeroplanes, swerving out and in, in an uneven arc. They looked like puppets from there, chasing each other, borne up in the air.

'Now he stands quite close to the edge. He gives her horse a slight push. It moves away from him. But not far enough towards insecurity. No, there is no fear in the girl's squeals. They always stop short at the edge of fear, light as wings gliding through the air, bright as day. They are a pretence of fear, not fear itself.'

Unawares, jealousy began to smoulder in her, something she thought she had outgrown. She pulled the sleeping-bag close over her so as to smother it.

It was dark inside. An isle of darkness, clean, warm with her breath, intimate. 'Something is wrong somewhere', she thought. 'So utterly wrong that it looks almost like being the right thing.'

She rummaged in the dark and took out her happiness. She held it thoughtfully on her palm as if it were a base coin. She flipped it up, listening intently the while, her ear close to it, to make out if it produced the right kind of clink. She strained her ear as though everything depended on the sound it would catch. But there was only the hum of the late noon silence. And the girl's merry squeals, far

lighter than wings. Those squeals rang genuine. Her own darkness was spurious.

'Sleeping—are you?' He shook her, laughing. She awoke. The shadows had lengthened. The breeze had died down over the tree tops. The leaves drooped. The benches, vacant earlier, now looked definitely deserted.

'Let's go.'

They looked at each other, a full day gone from them. The girl stood apart, withdrawn. Behind her father. The biscuit, cake and fruit boxes, with red ribbons knotted round them, which they had bought yesterday, were now in the girl's hands. Their contents would last her a week. 'From one day of the week to its next. An orderly succession of days. I keep a count of them. Perhaps she does too.'

She looked at the girl more intently. She saw her as if for the first time. The girl looked fragile, rather pale, lips parted like the lid of a tiny box forced out to a chink. But her eyes were large with black irises. In profile she looked somewhat dishevelled, like her father: regularity of line was not a strong feature with either. The hair at the back of her head struck out in a duck's tail.

She touched her hair for the very first time. The girl moved in a feeble attempt to shake off her hand but then, soon, stopped. She realised the time had come to leave and resistance was futile. Children smell their lot much as dogs their death, and both stop struggling after a certain point.

They left. Hands waved briefly in the air. The girl diffident, sorrowful. Sorrow grated like sand. The sun washed sand. It smeared his face. He held her by the finger. He turned around.

'He looks at me inquiringly. "You'll wait there for me, won't you?" he asks in a whisper. "I'll leave her at the boarding-house and be back in no time".'

His voice is too low for the girl to make out anything. But a certain suspicion wells up in her eyes as she watches her father.

In that moment, the briefest, she looked upon him, her own father, as a stranger—like the rest of the world. . .

'It's all right, though. Sooner or later she'll have to face it. Some day when she's grown up and looks at herself in a mirror, she'll find this noon peep out at her and she'll remember how when she was a child a certain woman, a complete stranger to her, came with her father once and stayed lying down on the grass the whole day; that woman never came again, but on that one occasion we ate ice-cream together. How surprising, that small things loom large in one's memory even after one has grown up. Like a certain sunshine, some peanut shells, the fluttering corner of a certain sleeping-bag, a certain ice-cream cone.'

* * *

Someone was shouting in the courtyard behind the bar. In the square opposite, the voices, which had come muffled to her in the park, were pitched harsh like fragments of glass, catching the last of the sun. She would wait for him. He had asked her to wait for him in this bar of an alien city. The place stank of stale beer. People at the other tables stole glances at her now and then. A young woman, alone, at the window, looking out.

She waited. She ordered beer to keep away the awareness of those glances. For out in the distance was the boarding-house. Tall glass windows. A long, high perimeter topped with broken glass. That girl lives behind the high wall. She sipped at her beer.

Presently she saw his shadow draw near across the square.

She gazed fixedly as the man crossing the square. The flagstones awash in the haze of the departing sun. A man walking across the gleaming stones. A woman sipping her beer, looking out at the man. . . And then it filled her with the wonder of a miracle that this man was *hers*, that he was coming to *her*. So wonderful she could hardly believe

it! It looked like a frozen scene from some movie. As the celluloid runs out of its spool a certain picture occupies the screen. Forever the same. A woman looking out of the window, a man walking across the square, the flagstones touched with the brilliance of the departing sun, his shadow across the stones—all these are imperishable. 'No one can take these away from me. Neither that girl nor his wife. These are my stories: none but I can decipher the hieroglyph on them.

'I felt his breath over me. Eyes closed, I could tell him by his breath, as indeed by the smell of his clothes. The first thing I noticed was the agitated look on his face as he came in. At once he downed two mugs of beer one after the other. Then he touched me on the spot on my shoulder where his lips pressed when he made love to me, and a feeble smile appeared on his lips. "Was I gone too long?" His eyes rested on me. His voice had a faint quiver in it. "I wanted her to go to sleep before I left". My eyes enveloped him and his pain. "Did she go to sleep?" I asked. He hesitated. He was a bad liar. I remember the first time I asked him if he was married. His hesitation was so ludicrous I almost laughed, for I didn't care a hang about his marriage so long as he was with me. But I was eager to see his daughter. I am an eager sort of person. I like the sound of that word. Sometimes. Though, I think that those who are eager seldom meet a happy end.

'What end is happy? He was still looking at me. I made up my mind I wouldn't stop him from drinking. I'd let him drink his fill. Occasionally we drank in his room, thirsty after we'd made love. He'd come to sit on the edge of the bed. I'd touch his naked back with my lips. Soon they'd be roaming all over, one shoulder blade to the other. His body, so white and vulnerable, looked virginal despite his marriage—perhaps I've already said this. I'd kiss the flesh over his heart. It rippled like a small fish. And it dinned with the

blood rushing about in it. I could hear it inside him when he'd be inside me.'

'Had she gone to sleep?' I asked again. A splinter of the retreating sun wedged itself in through the window. It lay on his palm. He shook it away. 'No'. He shook his head. 'She. . . she started crying when I was about to leave. She hid her face behind my fingers. I stood there while she sobbed. Can you hear her? I stood outside on the landing. I waited for her to quieten down, until the warden asked me to leave, for the longer I hung about the more hopeful she'd become that I'd stay back with her. I started going down the stairs. . .'

'What wilderness it must be', I thought, 'where she lives, alone—where even the faintest rustling of the leaves must be like a portent of disaster.' My bare hand retreated from his face to the table. We'd lost contact. He'd retreated into himself, closing the door behind him and bolting it from the inside. I stood outside, my ear to the door. 'As I went down the stairs. . .', he was saying from behind it.

'I can hear. But when we'd be together in bed at night, those sobs which descended the stairs with him would stop short and turn on their heels. I believe in my body more than I do in anything else. It will bring him back to me, spellbound.

'But not now. This moment there's no contact between us. Out hands lie idle. Besides, there are so many people around in the restaurant. I am like dust in their presence. A mere speck, knocking at a closed door, or hovering over the sobs descending the stairs.'

* * *

She counted the stairs as she climbed up. She had done it many times before—when going up at night or down in the morning. His small room lay between a narrow passage leading up to it and a terrace. There was a basin on one side of the

passage and over it a looking-glass nailed to the wall. Close to the faucet, his shaving tools ('How he laughed at my use of the word!') were scattered on the basin. He put out his socks and underwear to dry on the terrace. Beyond it stood the three poplar trees, their branches intertwined.

'I climb the stairs. The lamp-post has been lit. A dappled shadow is cast across the bed and half-way up the wall. It sways as the breeze rises. He is asleep beside me. I bend over his face and set out on my solitary journey across the desert between his sleep and my waking...

'How different were those days in the beginning! It was early summer when we first met. When winter came along I thought it was time we made a final decision. Either he'd have to be with me where I am, on this side of the night, or choose to remain on the other where we meet stealthily after dark, the other side with bleak weekends, a weeping girl, a shuttle train.

'Then the trees shed their old leaves and put on new ones. While we made love to each other the seasons shrank into the distance like trees by the roadside. So too the sobs which had lingered on the stairs.

'There was a time, though, when I resolved not to see him any more, not even to raise my eyes to his face or turn round if we ever ran into each other in the street—as if he were thin air I could walk through. Eyes closed. . . But when I opened my eyes, he was where he had been, with me heavy inside him like a brooding silence. He turned on his side blinking at me. "Want to go?" he said sleepily—"No! We still have some hours of the night left to us. Listen", I continued after a pause, "are you still thinking about it?"—"About what?" he asked, mildly surprised. "When you were going down the stairs", I mumbled, "those sobs followed you. The girl was crying."

'He said nothing. I went out and walked headlong on. I came to a halt. It was dark all around but for a yellow

wick-flame flickering in the middle of the passage. Below it in the corner was the telephone, cold, impersonal and frightening—like the black future—drawing me towards it.

'I picked up the receiver. The operator's voice came through. "Number, please. Which city?" The air crackled between us. It spanned the distance between the two cities and froze as the numbers clicked and another voice asked, "Who is it?"

'I brushed the question aside with a sweep of my hand. "Look," I said, "all I want to know is whether she has gone to sleep, or is she still crying?"

"Which girl are you talking about? There are one hundred and fifty children here."

'One hundred and fifty children! Hurriedly I put the receiver back in its cradle. One hundred and fifty children stretched out in a dormitory from one end to the other! I followed them, up in the dark aisle, in search of that one name which had a face, a girl's, who had played in the sun earlier in the day with her father. Then I burst out laughing. In that darkness, laughing all by myself, I discovered that pain is the only thing that neither diminishes nor increases when shared—it only comes out more clear and sparkling clean.

'I turned round, suddenly light and carefree. Back in the room I sat by him in the bed, wrapped in my blanket. A grubby morning began to fill the window. I watched the poplar trees emerge out of the darkness. Sometimes a person feels closer to death than to life. He does not die, but his whole life whirls past him like a merry-go-round, with its lost opportunities and the distances he could not span pursuing one another like the wooden horses with the same distances in between as in the beginning; none can catch up with the other and take hold of it.

'I take hold of him. He draws me into the warmth of his arms. "Are you leaving already?" His voice still smells of

yesterday's sunshine, of the grass, of the time spent together. "I'll come again," I reassure him. I am happy I can leave him before his smell can get stale. I'll come back next week but right now I can go—to my lonely room and the cold, unslept-in bed. I am really surprised at the couples who have to put up with each other day after day. They have no interludes in which to recoup their sense of wonder at the other's body. True, this continuity makes for a family. But I suppose I'm not cut out for the intimacy of a warm, conjugal bed. No, that's not for me.

'For me there are weekends, like so many incandescent lamp-posts spaced out in the darkness. They are put out as the day breaks. So must I gather my sleeping-bag, the purse and toothbrush and leave. I leave early in the morning like a thief so that the neighbours may not see me come out of his apartment.

'I look about the room for one last time before leaving. My eyes rove over his face turned towards the wall, my half of the pillow dimpled, some old toys the girl needs no longer, a few books I leave behind me every week, and the three poplar trees once green with leaves but now bare. Spring will return, and find me waiting for the summer. Autumn will be back too, followed by the short misty days of winter.'

She descended the stairs and came out into the street. The clamour of the street gave her a strange comfort. Men going out to work, the clanging trams, children going out to school. Occasionally someone looked at her, wondering perhaps where a lonesome young woman could be going so early in the morning.

'No, I am not going away. I am coming back.'

Translated from the Hindi by
KULDIP SINGH

On the Boat

P. Padmaraju

After sundown the world was enveloped in a melancholy haze. The boat glided softly on the still water. The water lapped against the sides of the boat in soft ripples. No life stirred, as far as the eye could see, and the dead world hummed soundlessly. That hum was inaudible but the body felt it and it filled the mind with its reverberations. A feeling of life coming to an end, of peace inexorable and devoid of all hope crept over one's consciousness. The vague, mysterious figures of distant trees moved along with the boat motionlessly. The trees, which were nearer, moved backwards, like devils with dishevelled hair. The boat did not move. The canal bank moved backwards.

My eyes looked deep into the still waters, penetrating the darkness. The stars relaxed on the bed of water swinging dreamily on the slow ripples and slept with eyes wide open.

No stir in the air. The rope by which the boatman pulled the boat, sagged and tautened rhythmically and the bells on

the guide-stick in the hand of the leader tinkled at each step. At one end of the boat, there was the red glare of a fire in the oven, alternately glowing into a flame and subsiding. With a small bucket, a boy baled out the water percolating into the boat through small leaks. Sacks filled with paddy, jaggery, tamarind and what not were stacked in the boat.

I lay down on the top of the boat staring at the sky. From inside the boat, tobacco smoke, mingled with soft, inaudible voices, spread in all directions. In the small room where the clerk sat, there was a tiny oil lamp, blinking in the darkness. The boat moved on.

A voice hailed us from a distance, 'Please bring the boat to this bank—this bank.' As the boat drew near two figures jumped on the footboard. The boat titled slightly to that side.

'Please do not mind us. We'll sit here on the top', said a woman's voice.

The man at the rudder asked her, 'Where were you all these days, Rangi ? I have not seen you for a long time.'

'My man took me to many places—Vijayanagaram, Visakhapatnam and we climbed together the hill of Appanna.'

'Where are you going now?'

'Mandapaka. How are you, brother? Do you still have the same clerk?'

'Yes'

The male figure fell down in a heap and his lighted cheroot slipped from his mouth. The woman put it out.

'Sit down properly,' she said.

'Shut up, you bitch. Do you think I am drunk? I'll break your ribs if you disturb me.'

He rolled over from one side to the other. The woman covered him with the sheet of cloth which had slipped to one side when he rolled over. She lighted a cheroot herself. When the match caught the flame, I saw her face for a brief moment. The dark face glowed red.

There was a hint of bass in her voice. When she talked

you felt she was artlessly confiding to you her innermost secrets. She was not beautiful, her hair was dishevelled. And yet there was an air of dignity about her. The black blouse she was wearing gave the impression that she was not wearing any. In the darkness her eyes sparkled as if they were very much alive. When she lighted the match, she noticed me lying nearby.

'There is someone sleeping here,' she said trying to wake up the man.

'Lie down, you slut. I'll break your neck if you disturb me again.'

With an effort she moved away from me.

The clerk stood on the footboard with the oil lamp in his hand. He asked, 'Who is that fellow, Rangi?'

'He is my man, Paddalu. Please do not charge us, sir, for the journey.'

'Is it Paddalu? Get him out! He is a rogue and a thief. Have you no sense? He's dead drunk and you have brought him to this boat.'

'Who says I am drunk?' complained Paddalu.

'You fools. Throw the fellow out. Why did you allow him to step on the boat ? He is dead drunk,' the clerk shouted to the boatman.

'I'm not drunk. I merely quenched my thirst a little,' protested Paddalu.

'Why don't you keep mum' admonished the woman.

'Please, sir, I beg of you. May God bless you, sir. We'll get down at Mandapaka,' she pleaded.

The man joined in the pleading, 'I'm not drunk, sir. Please be kind and allow us to go to Mandapaka.'

'If you make any row I'll have you thrown into the canal. Be careful.' The clerk went back to his room.

Paddalu sat up. He was not really drunk.

'He will have me thrown into the canal—the son of a bitch,' he said in a low voice.

'Keep quiet. If he heard what you said, then we're finished.'

'Let him look around the boat tomorrow morning. He puts on airs, the son of a bitch.'

'Hush! Someone is sleeping there.'

Paddalu lighted a cheroot. He had a very thick moustache. His face was oval. His spine curved like a bow drawn by a string. He was lean and sinewy and there was an air of nonchalance about him.

The boat was gliding along softly again. The boatmen were washing utensils after food, talking among themselves.

It was not cool, but I covered myself with a sheet. I felt a little afraid to leave my body exposed helplessly to the darkness. The breeze was sharp—the boat glided softly on the water like the thigh of a woman. The night was wrapped with tenderness—as in the caress of an unseen woman. I felt lost in that embrace and many memories of my past and of tales tinged with melancholy about woman tending man and bringing him happiness flitted across my consciousness.

At a little distance from me, two cheroots were glowing red in the darkness, It appeared as though life was sitting there heavily, smoking, and thinking about itself.

'Which is the next village on our way?' Asked Paddalu.

'Kaldaro,' said Rangi.

'We have a long distance to go.'

'Don't do it today. You ought to be careful. Not today. We will try some other time when it is safer. Not today. Will you listen to me,' pleaded Rangi.

'You are afraid—you slut,' said Paddalu. He tickled her side with a dig of his finger.

'Oh' she said and looked skyward as if she wished the feeling this gave her would last forever.

* * *

Gradually I fell asleep. The boat moved downstream as if also in sleep. The two figures not far from me were talking in whispers to each other for some time. Though I was sleeping a part of me was awake. I knew that the boat was moving, the water was lapping its side, that the trees on the banks were moving backwards. Inside the boat everyone was asleep. Rangi moved from my side to the rudder and sat beside the man who was handling it.

'How are you?' asked the man at the rudder.

'Oh! what wonders we have seen, my man and I. We went to a cinema. We saw a ship. What a ship it was. Brother it was big as our village. I do not know where its rudder was.' She told him of a hundred things and her voice caressed me in my sleep.

'Oh girl! I am feeling sleepy,' said the man at the rudder.

'I'll hold it, you lie down there,' said Rangi.

The boat moved on lightly, slowly. Without disturbing the silence, Rangi raised her voice in song:

Where is he! Oh where is he, my man?
I put the food in the plate and
Sit there awaiting his return.
Like a shadow the night deepens,
But no sleep comes to my eyes—Where is he? My man?
The cold wind stings me like a scorpion
and my nerves contract and ache,
Unless you press me with your warm body
I may die. . . Where is he? My man?

Rangi's voice had music in it. It seemed as though all living creatures heard the song in their sleep. Age-old tales of love reverberated sadly and mysteriously in that song. It spread like a sheet of water and the world was afloat on it like a small boat. Human life, with its love and longing, seemed heavy, inevitable and strange.

A little distance from me, Paddalu sat with his head covered with a sheet. But a gulf seemed to separate him from Rangi.

After some time Paddalu went inside the boat. I shook off sleep and lay looking at the stars. Rangi was singing:

You thought there was a girl in the lane behind the hut.
And you sneaked there silently.
But who is the girl, my dear man?
Is she not I in my bloom. . . .

Rangi's song travelled through the worlds; then returned and touched me somewhere in my heart. I felt drowsy. In my sleep, the elemental longing of man and woman for one another danced before me like rustic lovers playing hide and seek. A dream world, entirely new to me, spread before me in my sleep. Rangi and Paddalu moved about in a myriad forms. The song slipped away from my consciousness, and the doors of my mind were gradually closed even to dreams.

* * *

Some confusion in the boat woke me and I sat up. The boat was tied to a peg on the bank. The boatmen were moving about hurriedly in the boat and on the bank, with lanterns. On the bank two men stood on either side of Rangi holding her by her arms. One of them was the clerk. He had a piece of rope folded on one of his hands. It looked as if Rangi was going to receive a thrashing. I jumped on to the bank and asked him what was wrong.

The clerk's face flushed with anger. He said, 'The rogue has run away with some of our things. This daughter of a bitch must have got the boat to the bank while everybody was asleep. She was holding the rudder, the slut.' There was a note of despair and helplessness in his tone.

'What were the goods that were stolen?' I asked.

'Two baskets of jaggery and three bags of tamarind. That was why I said I would not allow them in the boat. I will have to make up the loss.' Then he asked Rangi, 'Where did he unload the goods?'

'Near Kaldari, my good sir!'

'You liar! All of us were awake at Kaldari'

'Then it must have been earlier at Nidadavolu'

'No, she will never tell us. We will hand her over to the police at Attili. Get on the boat.'

'Kind sir, please allow me to go.'

'Get on the boat, he ordered pushing her towards the boat.

Two boatmen dragged her into the boat.

'Sleepy beggars! Careless idiots! Have you no sense of responsibility? Why should you put the rudder in her hands?' The clerk was very put out. He went back to his room.

Rangi resumed her former seat. One boatman sat beside her to guard her. The boat moved again. I lighted a cheroot.

'Kind sir, spare me one too,' she asked me in a tone which suggested intimacy. I gave her a cheroot and a box of matches. She lighted it.

'Dear brother! What can you gain by handing me over to the police?'

'The clerk will not let you go,' said the boatman.

'Is Paddalu your husband?' I asked her.

'He is my man,' she replied.

The boatman said, 'He seduced her when she was a young girl. He did not marry her. Now he has another girl. Where is she, Rangi?'

'In Kovvur. Now, she is in her bloom. When she has endured as many blows as I have, she will look worse than me. The dirty bitch.'

'Then why do you have anything to do with him?' I asked.

'He is mine, sir!' she replied, as if that explained everything.

'But he has another woman.'

'What can he do without me? It does not matter how many women a man has. I tell you sir, he is a king among men. There is not another like him.'

The boatman said, 'Sir, you cannot imagine what this fellow really is, without knowing him. She was just bubbling with life and youth when she got entangled with him. One night, he locked her up in her hut and set fire to it. She was almost burnt to death. It was only her good fortune that saved her.'

'I felt like strangling him with my bare hands if I could only get at him. A red hot bamboo fell across my back from the roof of that burning hut.' She lifted her blouse a little and even in that darkness I could see a white scar on her back.

'Why are you still with him after all this cruelty?' I asked.

'I cannot help it, sir. When he is with me, I simply cling to him. He can talk so well and your sense of pity wells up like a spring. This evening we started from Kovvur. On the way, he begged me on his knees to help him in this affair. He said he was completely broke. We reached the Nidadavolu channel by a short cut across the fields. . . '

'Where did he land the goods?'

'How should I know'

'Oh! she will never tell the truth, the rogue,' said the boatman laughing.

There was a sudden impulse of curiosity in me to have a close look at her face. But in that darkness, she remained hazy and inscrutable.

The boat crawled slowly on the smooth sheet of water. As midnight passed, the breeze developed a colder sting. There was a slight rustle of leaves on the trees. I did not sleep again that night. Rangi's guard tried ineffectually to right his overpowering desire to sleep and finally yielded to it. But Rangi sat there listlessly smoking her cheroot, reconciled to her position.

'You were not married at all?' I asked her.

'No. I was very young when Paddalu took me away.'

'Which is your native village?'

'Indrapalem. Then I did not know he was a drunkard. Now, of course, I have caught it from him. There is nothing wrong if one drinks. But sometimes when he is drunk, he is wild.'

'You could have left him and gone back to your parents.'

'I fell unconscious. My neighbours must have rescued me in that state. The police arrested him the next day. But I told them categorically that he could not have been the author of the crime. That evening he came to me and wept for hours. Sometimes, when he is drunk he weeps like that. But when he is not drunk he is such a jolly fellow. I gave him that necklace.'

'Why do you still assist him in these crimes?'

'What am I to do when he comes and begs me as if his whole life depends on it?'

'Did he really take you to all those places, Vijayanagaram, Visakhapatnam and what not?'

'No. I wanted to gain the confidence of the boatmen. On two former occasions, this very boat was robbed.'

'What will you do, if the police arrest you?'

'Why should I do anything? What can they do? I have no stolen goods in my possession. Who knows who was responsible for the robbery? They might beat me. But ultimately they will have to set me free.'

'Supposing Paddalu is caught with these goods?'

'No. He would have disposed of them by now. I remained in the boat to give him enough time to effect his escape.'

She heaved a sigh and then said, *sotto voce*, 'All this goes to that dammed bitch. He will not leave her till her freshness fades away. I have to suffer all this for the sake of that slut.'

There was not a trace of emotion in her voice, nor was there any reproach. She accepted him as he was and was

prepared to do anything for him. It was not sacrifice, not devotion, not even love. It was simply the heart of a woman, with a strange complex of feelings, tinged with love as well as with jealousy. There was only one outward expression of this medley of feelings and that was the longing she felt for her man. Every fibre of that heart thirsted for that man. But she had no demands to make of him, ethical or moral. She did not mind if he was not true to her, even if he was cruel to her. She loved him as he was, with all his vagaries and pettiness and with his wild and untamed spirit. What did she derive from such a life with the dice so loaded against her? What was her compensation? Was not such a life very unhappy and burdensome? But then what was happiness except the lack of a consciousness of unhappiness? Was I happy judging by that standard?

The wind rose gradually. The boat moved faster. There were signs of the world waking slowly from its rejuvenating slumber. Here and there peasants could be seen going to their fields. The morning star had not yet risen. Rangi drew her knees closer, folded her arms around them and sat looking into the fading night.

'He is my man wherever he goes, he is bound to return to me,' she said slowly, not particularly addressing me. These words summarised the one hope, the one strength, the one faith that kept her irrevocably linked with life. Her whole life revolved around that one point. There was pity, fear and above all reverence in my heart for that woman. I wondered, how confusing, grotesque and terrifying were the affairs of the human heart.

I sat looking at her till the day broke. Before I got off the boat, I put a rupee in her hand without being observed, and then went away without waiting to see her reaction. I never met her again.

'That is what I feel like, when he becomes wild. But then there is no one else like him. You do not know him.

When he is not drunk he is as sweet as a lamb. He might take a hundred women. But he comes back to me. What can he do without me?'

The woman's sttitude struck me as strange, and I could not divine what held those two together. Rangi said again: 'No job suited either of us. So we had to take to thieving. When my mother was alive, she used to scold me for making a fool of myself. One night, he brought that girl to my hut.'

'Which girl?'

'The one he is now living with. He put her on my bed and lay down beside her. Before my very eyes. Both of them were drunk. The slut. I pounced upon her and scratched her violently. He intervened and beat me out of my breath. About midnight he went away with her somewhere. He returned again. I called him names and refused to admit him into the house. He collapsed on the doorstep and began to weep like a child. I was touched. I sat beside him. He took me into his lap and asked me to give him my necklace. "What for?" I asked him. He said it was for the other girl. I was beside myself with anger and heaped on him torrents of abuse. He told me, weeping, that he could not live without that girl. My anger knew no bounds. I pushed him out and bolted the door from inside. He pulled at it for a while and then went away. I lay with my eyes wide open and could not sleep, the house caught fire. He had locked the hut on the outside and set fire to it. I tried the door desperately and at that time of the night my shouts for help did not reach my neighbours. My body was being fried alive.'

Translated from the Telugu by
P. PADMARAJU

The Weed

Amrita Pritam

Angoori was the new bride of the old servant of my neighbour's neighbour. Every bride is new for that matter. But she was new with a difference. She was the second wife of her twice-married husband, who could not be called new because he had already drunk at the conjugal well. As such the prerogative of being new went to Angoori alone. This realisation was further accentuated considering the five years that passed before they could consummate the union. Besides, she had been here for a few months only. She still carried a rustic freshness and girlish coyness about her.

About six years ago, Prabhati went home to cremate his first wife. When the cremation was over, Angoori's father approached him and took over his wet towel. He wrung it dry, making a symbolic gesture of wiping away Prabhati's tears of grief, the profusion of which had wet his towel.

There never was a man though who cried enough to wet a yard-and-a-half of calico length. The towel became wet only

when he had the after-cremation bath. The simple act of drying the so-called tear-stained towel on the part of a person with an unmarried daughter implied, 'I give you my daughter to take the place of the one who has died. You need not cry anymore. I have even dried your tear-stained towel.'

This was the way Angoori married Prabhati. However, their union was postponed for over five years for two reasons, her age and her mother's paralysis. At last, when Prabhati was invited to take away the bride, it seemed she would have to stay back at the village. His employer was reluctant to add another mouth to his kitchen. But when Prabhati told him that his wife would keep her own house, he agreed.

Angoori stayed behind the veil from both, men and women in the beginning. However the loop of the veil soon started shrinking till it only covered her hair as was becoming of an orthodox Hindu woman. She was a dear one, a delight to the eye and the ear. There was laughter in the tinkling of her thousand ankle bells and a hundred thousand bells in her laughter.

'What are you wearing, Angoori?' I asked her one day.

'This lovely one? Anklet, for my foot.'

'That, on your finger?'

'*Bichwa* it be.'

'And on the arms?'

'*Pachela*.'

'Now tell me the one on your forehead.'

'They call it *aliband*.'

'Nothing on your waist today, Angoori?'

'Pretty heavy it weighs. Tomorrow, I wear. Today no necklace either, see. Joints gone. Tomorrow I go to the city and get a new joint to it, also buy a nose-pin with a ring. My mother-in-law kept my old one.'

Angoori was very proud of her silver jewellery. She was transported by the mere touch of her trinkets; her whole being seemed to be setting them off to maximum effect.

The weather became close with the turn of the season. Angoori too must have felt it in her hut where she passed the good part of the day. She stayed out more now. There are a few giant *neems* in front of my house and an old well under them. The well is not in use, though occasionally the construction workers still draw water from it. The spilt water makes several puddles around the well, which keep the atmosphere cool. Angoori often relaxed by the well.

'What you be reading, *bibi*?' Angoori asked one day, finding me with a book. I had a chair placed under the *neem*.

'Want to read it?'

'I, no reading.'

'Want to learn?'

'Oh, no!'

'Why? What's wrong with that?'

'Sin for women, reading be, see.'

'What about men?'

'They, no sin.'

'Who told you all this?'

'I know.'

'I read. I must be sinning.'

'City women, no sin. Village women, all sin.'

We both laughed at that. She had not learnt to question what she was told to believe. I thought if she found her peace in her naive convictions, who was I to question them.

Her body redeemed her dark complexion. There was an intense sense of ecstasy radiating all the time from her being; a resilient sweetness in her body. It is said a woman's body is like a lump of dough. Some have the looseness of underdone dough while others have the clinging plasticity of leavened dough. Rarely has a woman a body that can be equated to rightly done dough that is a baker's pride. Angoori's body belonged to the last category. Her rippling muscles impregnated the metallic resilience of coiled springs.

I felt with my eyes her face, arms, breasts, legs and experienced a profound languor. I thought of Prabhati, old, short-statured, hanging jaw of a man who could be the death of Euclid. Suddenly a funny idea struck me. Angoori was the dough covered by Prabhati. He was the one protecting, not the one participating. I felt a laugh welling up inside me but I checked it lest Angoori be offended. I started talking to her about her village and kinsfolk.

I inquired about the way marriages were arranged in her village.

'Girls, when five or six, adore 'someone's feet. He becomes her husband.'

'How do they do this?'

'The father does it for the girl, with money and flowers.'

'That's not the same as the girl doing it.'

'Oh, he does it for the girl, so it be the girl.'

'But the girl has not even seen the man.'

'Girls no see.'

'Not a single girl?'

She said 'no' hesitatingly but then added, 'Those in love do.'

'Do the girls in your village have love affair?'

'Some have.'

'Don't they sin, those who fall in love?'

'It's a sin, great one it be.'

'Are they not afraid of sinning?'

'They are. It's not them that do it. It's the men that make them do it!'

'How do the men make them do it?'

'With the weed, a wild one. One who eats it loves the man who gave it!'

'Does she know when eating the weed?'

'Oh, no, they do it without her knowing. Give her in sweet or betel. Once she has eaten the weed, nothing satisfies her but to be with her man.'

'True!'

'I know. I have seen with my own eyes. She is my friend, older than me.'

'What happened?'

'Why, she went crazy. Ran away with him to the city.'

'How do you know it was the weed?'

'What else? Why should she leave her parents? He brought her many things from the city, clothes, trinkets, sweets.'

'Love can also be otherwise?'

'No otherwise. When parents object, why does she like that?'

'Have you seen the weed?'

'No. It grows in a far land. My mother warned me not to accept a betel or sweets from a man lest it contain the weed.'

'You were wise. How come your friend ate it?'

'She suffered', she said sadly. 'No comb to her hair. Sang at night. She talked to herself.'

'What did she sing?'

'Don't know. They all sing, them who eat the weed. Weep also.'

The talk having become emotional, I retired.

I found her sitting under the *neem* one day in a profoundly abstract mood.

Usually one could hear Angoori's arrival at the well much before she reached it. Her anklets carried the tidings. But they were dumb that day.

'What's the matter, Angoori?'

She give me a blank look and then, recovering, said, 'Teach me reading, *bibi*.'

'What happened, Angoori?'

'Teach me writing my name.'

'Whom will you write to?'

She did not answer. Once again she was lost.

'Won't you be sinning?' I said to draw her. She would not talk. I retired for the afternoon siesta.

When I came out in the evening, she was still sitting there, crooning to herself a sob of a song. Hearing my footfall, she turned round and swallowed her song. She sat with hunched shoulders, perhaps because of the chill in the evening breeze.

'You sing well, Angoori', I watched her make a heroic effort to turn back the brimming tears and sketch a smile across her mouth.

'I know not singing.'

'You do, Angoori.'

'This was a. . . '

'Song that your friend sang', I completed her sentence.

'I heard it from her.'

'Won't you sing it for me?'

'Oh, it's just about the change of seasons, four months winter, four months summer, four months rain.'

'Not like that. Sing.'

She did not sing though she did tell me the wording. It went like this: Four months winter reigns, my heart shivers, my love; four months summer it be, wind shimmers in the sun; four months come rains, clouds tremble, my love.'

'Angoori?'

She looked up as if from a trance. I felt like shaking her by the shoulders and asking if she had eaten the weed. I did put an arm around her shoulders. I asked if she had had lunch. She cooked for herself since Prabhati ate at his master's.

'Did you cook today?'

'Not yet.'

'Did you have tea in the morning?'

'Tea! No milk today.'

'Why wasn't there any milk today?'

'I not get milk. Ram Tara. . . '

'Fetched milk?'

She nodded.

Ram Tara was the street night-watchman. When Angoori was not there he used to get a cup of tea at our place at the end of his watch before retiring with a cot to the well. After Angoori's arrival he started preparing his tea at her hearth. He, Angoori and Prabhati all had tea together in front of the hearth. Three days ago, Ram Tara went home on leave.

'You did not have tea for three days.'

She shook her head.

'Haven't eaten, too?'

She did not answer. Apparently, if she did, it was not more than a morsel.

I remembered Ram Tara, good looking, quick-limbed, full of mirth. He had a way of talking with laughter hovering at the corner of his lips.

'Angoori?'

'Yes, *bibi*.'

'Is it the weed?'

Tears flowed down her face and gathered at the tip on either side of her mouth.

'May I be accursed', she started in a voice a-tremble with tears, 'if I ever ate sweets from him. Not a betel even. If it be tea. . . ?' She could not finish, choked, by her sobs.

Translated from the Punjabi by
RAJ GILL

ISBN: 81-7436-279-7